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HITCHCOCK'S

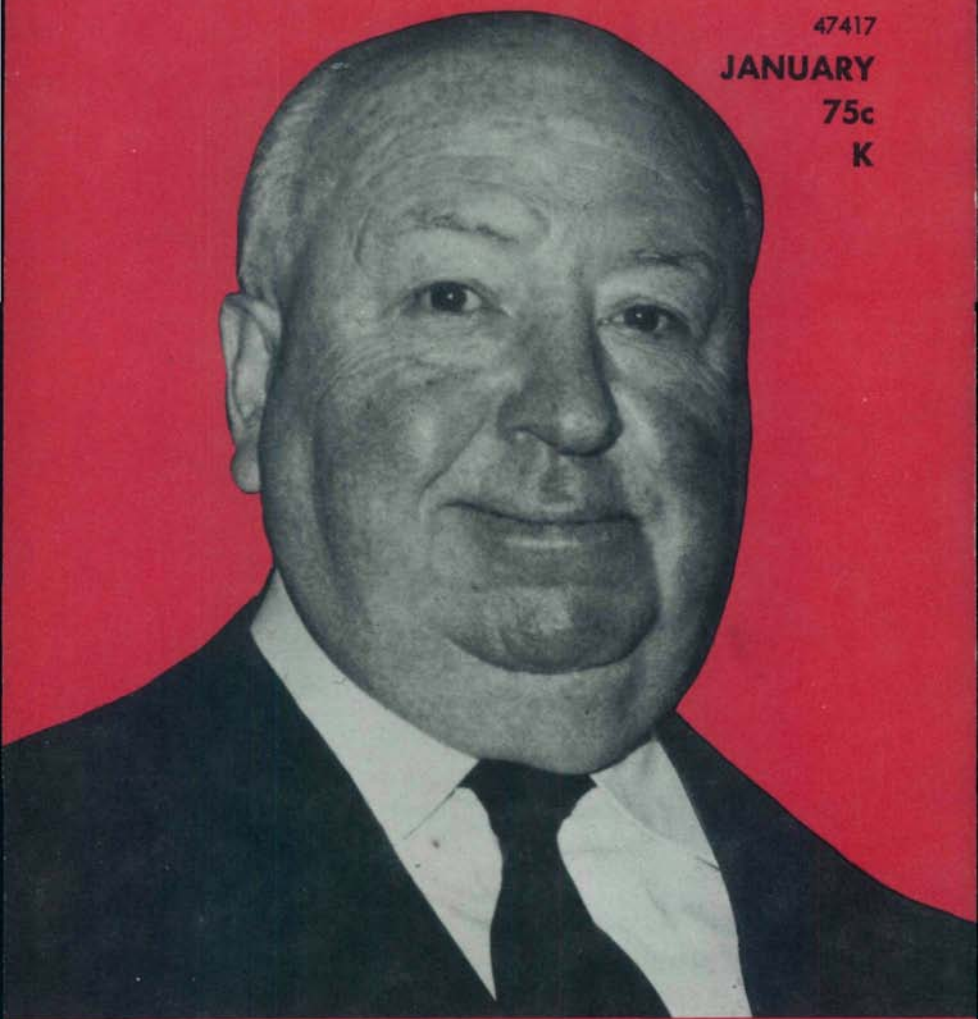
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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and Happy
New Year

Alfred Hitchcock



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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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When a well-planned gift backfires, it may be more than a misadventure.

Captain Leopold Drops

BOOM

It was not a party that Leopold wanted to attend.

Celebrating fortieth birthdays, or helping others to celebrate them, was not especially his idea of a good time. He was too far past forty himself to want a reminder of it, and of the happy home life that went with it. By his own fortieth birthday he'd been divorced six years.



However, Lieutenant Fletcher had urged him to come. "Hell, Captain, it's a night out! Pete Garraty doesn't turn forty every day. His wife especially asked me to urge you."

"I know," Leopold said with a sigh. "She phoned me too. But it's different for you and Carol. For one thing, you're about his age. And for another, you've got a wife to bring along."

"Millie said you could bring someone if you wanted to."

"Sure."

"Ah, come on, Captain! Pete's an assistant D.A. It won't look good if you don't show up. He's getting popular at city hall."

Departmental politics could be even worse than fortieth birthday parties. Leopold surrendered and reached for his afternoon coffee. "All right, Fletcher, I'll be there. What time?"

"Millie said eight o'clock. And it's a surprise, so don't say anything to Pete if you see him."

Just before he left for the day, in a mild burst of bravado, Leopold asked policewoman Connie

Trent to accompany him to the party that evening. She hesitated only a moment and then said, "Sure—it sounds like fun."

When he picked her up at seven-thirty, Connie was wearing a blouse and long skirt. He'd never seen her so dressed up. "You look great," he said, feeling a bit like a proud father. "Do you need a sweater or something?"

"No, it's warm."

It was indeed warm for late May. He drove with the windows down, enjoying the balmy breeze blowing in from the Sound. It was Friday night, the beginning of the weekend, and though he'd be at his desk as usual the following morning, there was still something festive in the air. Perhaps it was only Connie Trent at his side.

"I only had time to get him a necktie," she said, holding up her gaily wrapped package. "Is that all right?"

Leopold had never thought about a gift. "Sure. I forgot to bring anything."

"This can be from both of us."

They reached the Garraty home just after Fletcher and his wife, and followed Millie Garraty into the big master bedroom of the sprawling ranch house. "Leave your gifts on the bed," she told them, and explained that Pete had been sent off to the store on some

by Edward
D. Hoch

pretext, allowing the guests to assemble in secret. There were almost thirty in all, including a sprinkling of local political figures and some familiar faces from the D.A.'s office. The rest were friends and neighbors, and a brother named Steve whom Leopold hadn't met before.

Pete Garraty was a popular fellow, a criminal lawyer who'd joined the district attorney's staff a few years earlier. Though he was one of twenty-odd assistants in the growing department, his skill at trial work quickly made headlines. He was a stocky man with thin blond hair, and a liking for flashy clothes, in contrast to his wife Millie, who seemed a more conservative dresser. She was a few years younger than Pete, and not really attractive. Her face was too thin and her nose too sharp, and her constantly changing hair styles hinted at a search for beauty she'd never quite found.

"Quiet now," she told the latest arrivals. "I hope you parked your car around the corner so he won't see it." She passed them little cups of fruit punch and sent them to the bedroom to deposit their gifts.

Leopold was lingering in the hallway, feeling uncomfortable as he awaited the guest of honor,

when Millie passed him carrying her cup of punch and some gifts from other late arrivals. A moment later he heard her give a soft curse from the bedroom. "Damn! I've spilled my punch!"

"Can I help?" he volunteered.

"No, no! It's just that it went all over some of the gifts."

Two gifts had taken most of the liquid. One was Connie's necktie, the other looked like a cigar box. "It couldn't be helped," Leopold said.

"I have some paper here. I'll just rewrap them."

"That's not necessary, Millie."

"Everything must be perfect," she insisted, already stripping the gay paper from Connie's tie box. "I wonder who brought this box of cigars. Pete will stink up the whole house with them."

Leopold glanced at his watch. "It's almost eight-thirty."

"Oh, no! Go back in the other room, will you, Captain? Get everyone into the family room and out of sight. I'll be finished here in a minute."

Leopold found Connie deep in conversation with Fletcher's wife. "Pete will be returning soon. Millie wants us all to hide."

Something in his tone of voice caused Connie to whisper, "Don't be such a grouch, Captain."

"Am I?"

"At times. Weren't you ever forty?"

"I think I was four the last time anybody gave me a birthday party."

In the crowded family room, he found himself pressed into a corner with Steve Garraty. "What I won't go through for an older brother," Steve chuckled. "If Barbara ever pulls this on my fortieth, I'll divorce her."

"Quiet everybody," Millie said, returning from the bedroom. "I think his car is coming."

A station wagon pulled into the driveway and a moment later Pete Garraty opened the side door. "*Happy birthday!*" someone shouted. "*Surprise!*"

As the lights went on, Pete Garraty's boyish face registered surprise and then pleasure. "Millie—did you do all this? Damn it, woman, you might have warned me at least!"

The others were gathering around, shaking his hand and wishing him well. Leopold joined in, and got a smile and a few words from the guest of honor. "Glad to see the police department's represented here! Without you I'd be out of a job!"

Millie was busy handing out more punch, and some of the others had discovered beer in the refrigerator. Leopold saw that

Fletcher had loosened his tie and settled down to some drinking and talking. Connie Trent came up munching a cracker. "This cheese dip is good. I'll have to ask Millie what's in it."

"Do women always do that at parties?"

She gave his arm a little squeeze. "You're still a grouch." She glanced around the room, looking over both the house and its guests. "Don't they have any children?"

"One son. He's away in his first year at college."

After an hour or so of drinking and chatting, Millie suggested that Pete open his gifts. He settled into a chair at the far end of the livingroom and she brought them out from the bedroom, a few at a time. Mostly they were the usual joking reminders of turning forty, references to old age or to his sex life, but Pete took it all in good humor. The few legitimate gifts, like Connie's necktie and a popular best seller, were received with special thanks by the host. He was like a small boy opening his gifts, ripping into them with a haste that left the floor littered with torn paper.

"Now what's this?" he asked, unwrapping the box of cigars. Then, as his fingers started to lift the lid, Leopold saw his expres-

sion freeze into one of horrified disbelief. There was a flash of fire and then an explosion.

Instantly the room was filled with smoke and panic, screaming women and terrified men. Leopold tried to find Fletcher, tried to push his way through the mass of near-hysteria.

When he reached the end of the room as the smoke cleared, he saw three crumpled bodies around the overturned chair. One, a man he didn't know, was bleeding badly. "Get an ambulance!" Leopold shouted over his shoulder.

The second one was Fletcher's wife, Carol. She was dazed but seemed to have only minor cuts. He saw that Fletcher was at her side, helping her up.

The blast had hurled Pete Garraty over the back of the chair. The ambulance would do him no good. He was dead.

For the next several hours, the house and the street outside were a mass of churning confusion. The district attorney, the police commissioner, and the mayor all arrived on the scene within an hour, expressing shock and horror. With them came a small army of reporters and television cameramen, lighting up the outside night as they recorded each new arrival and departure.

Connie was with Fletcher's wife, trying to induce her to go to the hospital, while a number of the other women were comforting Millie Garraty. The injured man, a neighbor, had been taken to the hospital with a shattered left arm, but it appeared he would live.

"What is it?" the commissioner asked Leopold. "You were here. Who could have done such a thing?"

"He had a lot of friends. I guess he had some enemies too."

"Any prosecutor has enemies, but this must have been a madman."

"Maybe," Leopold agreed. "Right now I'm mostly interested in how that bomb got in among the gifts."

"Do whatever is necessary to crack this case, Captain. Use as many men as you need."

Leopold found Fletcher in the bedroom, examining the window screen. "Anything?"

"It's been cut, Captain. At the bottom and the side, where it wouldn't show right away."

"The window was open?"

Fletcher nodded. "Because of the warm weather. Someone slit the screen, lifted up the corner, and reached in to leave the bomb on the bed with the other gifts."

"Or else," Leopold considered, "a guest brought the bomb and



slit the screen to make it appear that's what happened."

Fletcher bent closer. "The light's no good in here, but our lab boys with a microscope should be able to tell us if it was cut from inside or out."

"Take the whole screen off and give it to them." Leopold glanced down at the big double bed, suddenly feeling sorry for Pete Gar-

raty's widow. Then he remembered. "How's Carol?"

"She's all right, Captain. Just a few cuts on the arm. Connie's getting her fixed up."

"Shouldn't she go to a hospital?"

"You don't know my wife! Getting her into a hospital for anything but having a baby is next to impossible!"

"I'd better go see Millie Garraty."

He passed the technical experts doing their jobs in the livingroom, and sent a couple of men out to check the ground beneath the master bedroom window. Then he went into the spare bedroom where Millie Garraty was stretched out on her son's bed.

"Millie, I don't know what to say."

She opened her eyes and looked at him. They were heavy with sleep and Barbara Garraty whispered, "The doctor gave her a pill."

Millie roused herself enough to say, "Captain, get the person who did this. Just get the man who killed Pete!"

"I will," Leopold promised. Then he left the room.

In the morning Leopold's office was crowded. Some of the men, investigators from the district attorney's office, were people he barely knew.

"Any luck on the bomb?" someone asked.

"We're working on it," Leopold replied. "It wasn't too strong—a three-inch pipe bomb full of gunpowder, rigged to explode when the cigar box was opened. The detonator was battery-operated."

"It was strong enough to kill Pete."

"Yes," Leopold agreed, "it was strong enough for that."

"What about the window screen?" The man who spoke was young and sharp, and Leopold disliked him.

"Lab examination shows it was cut from outside the house. The wires were turned in just a bit. Also, we found part of a shoe print in the dirt. Not enough for identification, though. Not even enough to call it male or female."

"So where are we, Captain?"

Leopold leaned back and looked at the wise men from the D.A.'s office. "I thought you could tell me."

"He was working on some Mafia things. It looks like a gang killing."

"Could be." Leopold considered the possibility. "But wouldn't his death do them more harm than good? Look what it's stirred up already!"

"If anybody knows about it, Gonzo does," Fletcher said. "Should I go see him, Captain?"

"No. I'll talk to Gonzo myself. I want you to check out every single guest, Fletcher."

One of the D.A.'s men objected. "I thought you just said the killer was outside the house."

"I'd like to cover all the angles," Leopold answered cryptically.

There was more discussion before the meeting finally broke up close to noon. When they were alone, Fletcher said, "You've got an angle on this, haven't you, Captain?"

"Maybe, maybe not. How's your wife?"

"Fine. I finally persuaded her to stop at the hospital on the way home and have a couple of stitches taken in one of those cuts. But otherwise she's good."

"What about that neighbor, Morris?"

"He'll live, but he might lose the arm. They're trying to save it."

Leopold shook his head. "That bomb could have killed everybody in the room. It could have collapsed the house, or started a fire."

"The guy musta been a real nut, Captain."

He closed his eyes for a moment, and saw Millie Garraty on the bed again, pleading with him to find her husband's killer. "Maybe."

"You wanted me to check the guests."

"Yes. And Millie Garraty."

"Millie?"

"She spilled a glass of punch on those gifts, Fletcher, and re-wrapped two of them. One was the cigar box—I saw it. She could

have put the bomb in it then."

"Captain, Millie wouldn't do that! She wouldn't kill Pete!"

"I don't think so either, Fletcher, but she handled that box. She rewrapped it and no one watched her do it."

"None of the guests admit bringing cigars, Captain. Doesn't that prove the package had to come through the window?"

"Even an innocent person might be terrified at this point. They wouldn't want to admit bringing a gift that blew up."

"All right. I'll start checking them out."

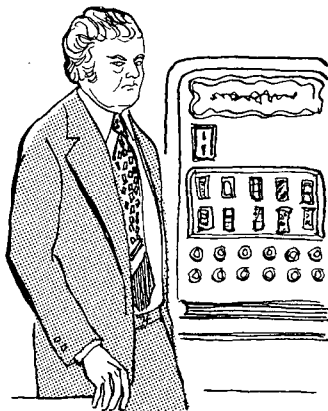
Leopold stood up. "And I'll go see George Gonzo."

If there was a Mafia organization in the city—a question still open to debate at Headquarters—George Gonzo would have been its logical head. He'd spent most of his adult life cultivating an image of himself as a tough guy who liked to order people around. Now, in his mid-forties, he'd softened the image to a godfatherlike despotism that he seemed to imagine was in style. There was no doubt that George Gonzo controlled a good deal of the city's gambling and vice, but Leopold personally doubted he had any strong ties with organized crime on a national level. Even the

Mafia must demand more class than George Gonzo could muster.

"Leopold!" Gonzo said, standing up from behind a steel desk in his dusty office at the rear of the Star Vending warehouse. "Is this a pinch?"

"Have you done anything to be pinched for, George?"



"I'm just getting out my vending machines, like always."

Leopold tapped the front of a mirrored candy machine that filled one corner of the little office. "Still taking nickels from schoolkids, George?"

"It's dimes these days. The nickel machines are long gone."

"What about the quarters for the peep shows? The kids must like all those naked women."

Gonzo's face puckered into a frown. "You trying to hassle me, Leopold? The D.A.'s boys have

been givin' me enough trouble already about peep shows. It's all legit here—candy, cigarettes, chewing gum. No peep shows."

"I didn't come about the machines, George. You heard what happened to Pete Garraty."

"Yeah. Too bad. No life begins at forty for him, huh?"

Leopold held his temper in check and said quietly, "Bombings have always been your thing, George."

"Who, me?"

"You."

"You're crazy!"

"Twenty years ago you spent three years in the pen for blowing up a cigar store that was making book in your territory."

"That was a bum rap."

"I dug out the records. You were making bombs in your basement. Pipe bombs, like the one that killed Pete Garraty."

"Jeez, that was twenty years ago! I was a kid!"

"You were twenty-six years old."

He licked his lips nervously. "I don't know nothin' about Garraty."

"How about your boys? Any of them do it?"

"Hell, Garraty wasn't botherin' us."

"Downtown, they think he was. They think you had a damn good

motive for sneaking up to his house and cutting the window screen and slipping a bomb in with his birthday gifts."

"I didn't even know it was his birthday!"

"A lot of people were invited. The word could have gotten around."

"Well, it didn't!" He was angry, but on the defensive. He might have something to hide, Leopold decided.

"If Garraty indicted you on an obscenity rap, he could have shut down your entire operation."

"Nobody gets convicted of obscenity nowadays."

"Sometimes the supreme court thinks otherwise."

Gonzo leaned forward across the desk. "Hell, Leopold—you know as well as I do that Garraty was trying to railroad me. An indictment right now, six months before the elections, would have looked damn good in the papers."

"Pete Garraty wasn't running for anything."

"The hell he wasn't! The word is he wanted the nomination for the state senate. And the primary's coming up soon."

Leopold had heard the rumors too, but had discounted them. One always heard political rumors about any successful lawyer. "If he was trying to railroad you,

would you sit still for it, George? Or would you get him out of the way?"

"I didn't kill him."

"Who did?"

"I don't know."

Leopold sighed and stood up. "I may want to see you again, George."

"You know where to find me."

Lieutenant Fletcher found Millie with her brother-in-law Steve, going over the funeral preparations. Her face was drawn, and though she seemed calm he knew it was only the result of the doctor's tranquilizers. Even grief was a luxury these days.

"How are you feeling, Millie?" he asked.

"I'll survive. How's Carol's arm?"

"Fine. No problem."

Steve Garraty had never really looked that much like his brother, but now, seeing him in the kitchen with Millie, it might have been Pete—taller and slimmer—but still Pete. "I'm trying to get Millie to move in with us for a few days," Steve said. "This house is no place for her."

Fletcher glanced toward the closed livingroom door, imagining that he could still smell the odor of burning gunpowder. "It certainly isn't! I'm surprised you

even stayed in it last night."

"The doctor gave me something to make me sleep, and that's what I did," Millie said. "But I suppose you're both right. I should move out till after the funeral, and until the place gets fixed up. But Johnny, my son, will be home from college today for the funeral. Where will he stay?"

"We'll fit him in," Steve said. "Never fear."

"I wanted to talk to both of you a bit," Fletcher said, "if you're up to it."

Steve looked at Millie. "Go ahead."

"Just the usual questions. Any enemies? Any recent threats on his life?"

Millie shook her head. "Nothing like that."

"Did he talk much about his work? The cases he was prosecuting?"

"Not really."

"Did anyone he sent to prison ever threaten to kill him when they got out?"

"Not that I know of. If they did, he never told me."

"Did he ever mention a man named George Gonzo?"

"He might have. Gonzo's name was in the papers sometimes."

Fletcher hesitated before asking the next question. "You saw that cigar box, didn't you, Millie? The

captain says you spilled a drink on it and had to rewrap it."

"Yes, I suppose I did. There couldn't have been two cigar boxes, could there?"

"We didn't find another one. Nor any cigars."

"I didn't look inside. I just took off the soiled paper and rewrapped it."

"There was no card?"

"I didn't see one."

Steve Garraty interrupted at this point. "You're certainly not implying that she could have had anything to do with this, are you, Lieutenant?"

"Of course not. I just ask questions."

"I hope so! She's no more involved than my wife Barbara. If a woman's going to kill her husband, she doesn't do it with a bomb at his fortieth birthday party!"

"No," Fletcher agreed, feeling like a fool. The captain shouldn't have put him up to this line of questioning. He plunged off on a quick tangent. "Is there any possibility Pete was . . . well, fooling around with another woman? Could it have been a jealous husband?"

Millie closed her eyes, as if she'd felt a sudden sharp pain. "There was no other woman. If there had been, Pete would have

told me. We never had secrets from one another."

"Never?"

"Never."

"What about the surprise party?"

She waved her arm. "That was a minor thing, a temporary thing." Then she lowered her eyes. "You're right—I couldn't keep a thing from him. He overheard me ordering a birthday cake for thirty people and I had to tell him."

Fletcher grunted. "He was a great actor. He really seemed surprised."

"Pete was great in a lot of ways," she said quietly.

After a moment's silence Steve Garraty got to his feet. "Come on, Millie—I insist. Gather up what you'll need and I'll take you back to our place. You'll be better off there."

"All right," she agreed finally. The will to resist seemed to have gone out of her.

Fletcher told them he wanted to examine the livingroom and bedroom some more, and he stayed on after they left. Watching Millie walk to Steve Garraty's car with her overnight bag, he thought that he had never seen a woman quite so pathetic.

The livingroom was as he remembered it: scorched carpet,

overturned chair, blistered walls. Half-finished cups of punch still stood on some of the tables.

Fletcher stood in the center of the room, looking around, wondering just why he had stayed behind. Was it Captain Leopold's half-formed notion of Millie's guilt? He went into her bedroom and found the window locked. Seeing it by daylight, with the bushes outside, gave him a new perspective. Whoever approached the window had to know exactly what he was doing.

He was about to leave the house when he decided, for no reason at all, to check the basement. He knew Pete Garraty had a room down there, a sort of workshop where he also kept a few guns he used for hunting. Fletcher was never much of a hunter, and he'd hated even having guns around the house ever since his son was accused of accidentally shooting a man. That case had been cleared up, but the memory of it lingered on.

There was a workbench in Garraty's basement room, and a gunrack where he kept a rifle and shotgun. Everything seemed neat and orderly. Then he noticed a tall fiberboard barrel obviously meant for rubbish. Peering inside, he saw several shotgun shells lying in the bottom.

He reached in to pick up one.

Leopold had spent the afternoon assigning men to run down the usual number of telephoned tips. They rarely amounted to anything, but on a big case the calls always came in and had to be checked by someone. When Connie found him still at his desk late in the day, she said, "You look tired. Want some coffee?"

"Sure. It might perk me up."

"Is Fletcher back yet?"

He was about to reply when Fletcher walked in. From the slight smile on his face it was obvious he had something. "What is it?" Leopold asked.

Fletcher sat down and took a shotgun shell from his pocket. "This, Captain. I found a bunch of them in a rubbish barrel in Garraty's basement. The powder's been removed from them."

"Oh?"

"And I just came from the lab. Powder of this type is almost certainly the kind used in that pipe bomb. It was removed from these shells and wadded into that pipe."

Connie looked somber. "Then we're back to Mrs. Garraty again."

"Seems like it."

"I can't believe she could have done it."

"Look at the facts," Leopold

said. "I can't believe it either, but look at the facts. We're supposed to believe that some criminal like George Gonzo crept up to that house between eight and eight-thirty, when it was just barely dark, cut the window screen, and reached inside with that gift-wrapped bomb. Consider what knowledge was necessary for that. First, the bomber had to know about the surprise birthday party. With thirty guests and all the necessary preparations, that wouldn't be too difficult, I suppose. But now consider the second bit of knowledge the bomber had to possess—he had to *know*, beyond doubt, that Millie Garraty would pile the birthday gifts on the bed, within reach of the window. If she had put them in the basement, or a closet, or the bathtub, or even *under* the bed, his entire scheme would have collapsed. She might have simply left them in the livingroom. In truth, there are a dozen places she might have put them—all just as likely as that bed by the window."

Connie looked unhappy. "But the screen was slit from outside!"

"After she placed the bomb in the cigar box, Millie could have sneaked out of the house long enough to do it. Or, more likely, she cut it earlier in the day, before the guests arrived. You'll re-

member it wasn't at all noticeable."

"She made the bomb in Pete's basement workshop?"

Leopold nodded. "There are enough revolutionary manuals around these days on how to do it. A woman could follow directions as well as anyone, removing the powder from Pete's shotgun shells and stuffing it into that pipe, then rigging a battery-operated detonator."

Fletcher was staring at the floor. "Do you want me to pick her up, Captain?"

"I can see you two don't agree with me."

"I suppose we agree," Connie said. "We just don't like it."

"Any arguments against it?"

"I got one," Fletcher replied. "If she was planning to kill him, why would she tell him about the party?"

"Did she tell him about the party?"

Fletcher nodded. "He caught her ordering the cake. She says they never had secrets from each other anyway."

"Well, you've answered your own question. She had to tell him."

"I suppose so," he admitted, still not happy about it.

"Bring her in, Fletcher, but don't tell her why. I'll just talk to

her some more, and see how she reacts to these shotgun shells."

Leopold had never been a close friend to Millie Garraty, and perhaps he lacked the personal involvement that Fletcher felt in the case. Still, he was trying to view it objectively, trying to weigh the accumulating evidence and arrive at the right conclusion. An outside bomber seemed highly unlikely, especially since Fletcher's discovery in the basement. That meant Millie Garraty—or someone close enough to the family that they could use the basement workshop.

He wondered about Steve Garraty. He was still wondering when Fletcher returned with Millie.

She sat down opposite his desk and asked, "What is it you wanted with me, Captain? Have you found the person who killed Pete?"

"Perhaps. Tell me about your husband's basement room, where he kept his tools and hunting rifles and things. Did he ever take people down there, or let people use it?"

She shook her head vigorously. "No, never."

"How about his brother Steve?"

"No, Steve hasn't been down there in years."

Leopold sighed as his last possi-

bility evaporated. "Millie, I have to ask you this. I hope you'll excuse me. Did you kill your husband?"

That was when Millie Garraty slid out of her chair and slumped to the floor in a faint.

Leopold called for Connie and in a few moments Millie Garraty had recovered enough to return to the chair. Now her face was chalk-white, and her hands were trembling. He saw Connie and Fletcher exchange nervous glances.

"Mrs. Garraty—Millie—I'm sorry, but you understand I'm just doing my job. When you spilled that cup of punch on the gifts, and had to rewrap the box of cigars . . ."

"Yes," she said, so quietly that he could barely hear her. "Yes, I killed him."

"That's when you did it?"

"Yes. When I rewrapped the cigars."

"Mrs. Garraty, I must warn you of your rights. I'd suggest you consider phoning a lawyer before you answer any more questions."

"Yes," she answered, her face expressionless.

"Do you want a lawyer?"

"Yes."

"Connie, show Mrs. Garraty to the private waiting room." He meant the interrogation room, but

he didn't want to use that word.

When they were alone, Fletcher said simply, "I guess you were right, Captain."

"Yeah." Leopold somehow didn't feel the old triumph that a confession usually brought. Perhaps it had been too easy.

"Should I phone the commissioner?" Fletcher asked.

"Wait a bit. There's plenty of time for that."

Fletcher was opening a package from the lab. "Here's the remains of the cigar box. We'd better put it in the evidence file for the trial."

Leopold glanced at the charred lid. "*Havana Supremes*. I wonder how they manage to get Cuban cigars into the country these days."

"They didn't, Captain. There were no cigars in the box—just the bomb."

"Yes, but . . ." Leopold began, and then fell silent. "You searched the place, Fletcher," he said after a moment. "Surely you found the cigars that were in here."

"No cigars, Captain."

"In the wastebaskets?"

"Nothing."

Leopold grunted. "I suppose she put them down the disposal." He looked at the box again. Fifty cigars. What in hell does one do with fifty cigars?

Then he knew. He knew what he should have known all along.

Connie Trent came back into the office. "Steve Garraty and his wife are outside, Captain. They heard that Fletcher had picked up Millie and they want to know why."

"Bring them in, Connie. And bring in Millie Garraty too. I think it's about over."

They crowded into his office. It was getting dark now—later than he'd thought. He felt very tired.

"Sit down, please, Millie." He was aware that he was using her first name again.

"What's the meaning of all this?" Steve Garraty asked. "Why are you questioning Millie when you should be out tracking down George Gonzo?"

"I've talked to Gonzo. He's clean." Leopold touched his fingers together. "You see, an outsider wouldn't have known where the gifts would be, even if they had known about the birthday party."

"You mean you think Millie killed him?"

"No. As a matter of fact, I know now that she didn't. Only one person could have killed Pete Garraty, and that was Pete Garraty himself."

His words fell among them like a dropping bomb. Everyone

started talking at once, and he had to raise a hand to quiet them. "It was the cigar box, of course, that told me. I was convinced that Millie made the bomb in Pete's basement workshop, and then spilled her drink on those gifts so she'd have an excuse to unwrap one. I imagined her emptying out the cigars and planting her bomb in that box. But the idea is just as impossible as the outsider theory, for two reasons. First, Fletcher didn't find the discarded cigars anywhere in the house. And second, how would Millie have known in advance that the right type of box would present itself? The bomb was too large for a tie box, too heavy for a shirt box. It wouldn't have fit with a bottle of Scotch. No, it had to be prepared for a cigar box, and therefore the bomber had to know there'd be a cigar box present."

"You mean the bomber had a confederate?" Steve Garraty asked.

"It would be farfetched to imagine one person bringing a gift-wrapped—and empty—cigar box so Millie could place a bomb in it, when the bomb could have been placed in such a box earlier. No, only one person made the bomb and placed it in that box, and wrapped the box like a birthday gift. Since we've found evi-

dence the bomb was made in the basement workshop, and since only Pete and Millie had access to it, one of them must have done it. I've already shown that Millie could not have acted on the spur of the moment, hoping for the right-shaped box—so that leaves Pete."

"But why would he want to kill himself?" Fletcher asked.

"Simple—he didn't. His death was accidental. George Gonzo told me Pete wanted to run for the state senate. What better way to grab the voters' attention before the primaries than with a bomb in a cigar box, disguised as a birthday gift? Of course a man who'd do such a thing must be a little nuts. But he figured Gonzo's people would be blamed, and he'd bolster his image as the crime-fighting assistant D.A. the underworld feared. Political careers have been built on far less. Pete knew about the party. He made his pipe bomb, assembled it in the cigar box with battery and detonator, and took it with him when he pretended to go to the store. He'd have known Millie would put the gifts on the bed, so he sneaked around the rear of the house, slit the screen, and reached in with the bomb."

"But he certainly didn't plan for it to go off," Connie said.

"Of course not. But what happened? Millie spilled a drink on it, and rewrapped it with different paper. Pete didn't realize what he was opening until it was too late. Instead of pretending suspicion about the cigar box, he went ahead and opened it—and blew himself up." Leopold glanced now at Millie. "He wasn't worth protecting with a confession, Millie. He just wasn't worth it."

"I . . ." she began, and then fell silent.

"What will you tell the papers?" Steve Garraty asked.

"In England they'd call it death by misadventure, I suppose. We'll have to tell the full story and hope the public understands. And pities him just a little."

After they'd gone, when he was alone with Connie Trent, Leopold sat for a long time staring at the charred cigar box in its plastic evidence bag. It might have been a crystal ball holding untold secrets.

"It's late," Connie said. "I guess I'll be getting along home too."

"Havana Supremes," Leopold said.

"What?"

"The brand of cigars. You can't get Cuban cigars in America, you know. There's an embargo."

She'd picked up her purse and

was starting for the door. "So? Does it make any difference what brand was on the box?"

"A big difference," Leopold said sadly.

Something in his voice stopped her. "What is it?"

"This damned case! I've never had one like it!"

"What do you mean?"

"When Pete Garraty unwrapped the paper and saw this box, he'd have *known* it was his bomb. The paper might have been different, but still he'd have known. No one else would have been giving him a box of Havana Supremes." He looked up at her. "He wouldn't have opened the box, Connie."

"But he *did* open it! We all saw him!"

"And we saw the terrified look on his face. But he would have opened that box, knowing what was in it, *only* if he knew it wouldn't explode. If he'd made the bomb with loving care, placed it in the box, and failed to hook up one of the battery wires. The publicity would be just as effec-

tive that way, and there'd be no danger to himself or to any of the guests. An underworld bomb, meant to kill him, but it didn't go off! That's the way he would have planned it, Connie. And he would have told Millie about his scheme, because they never had secrets."

"But it *did* go off! It *did* kill him!"

"Because somebody opened that cigar box later and connected the wire."

Connie put a hand to her mouth. "Not Millie!"

"Who else? She spilled the drink, she rewrapped the gift. Hell, she *confessed* to it!"

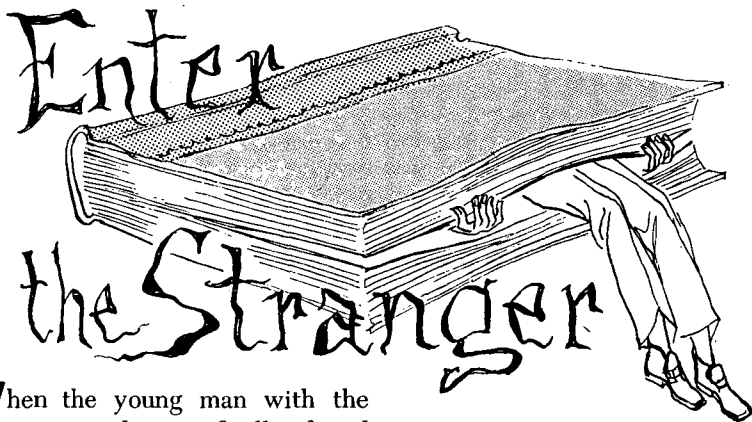
They sat in silence for a long time, and finally Connie asked, "What are you going to do now?"

"Go home to bed," he said with a sigh. "There's probably not a prosecutor in town who could get a conviction in this case. She confessed once, and perhaps she will again. Otherwise, well, she has to live with what she did."

He locked away the cigar box and turned out the lights as he left.



There are times, when one escapes into fantasy, that a misty mirage seems to portend a strange destiny.



When the young man with the dream-scarred eyes finally found his way to Windfall, De Vore Goring's secluded estate, he stood trembling in the rain under the lighted windows, and not even the thunder rumbling over the wooded foothills behind him sounded louder in his ears than the frantic drumming of his own heart, a disturbance caused less by awe than by joyful anticipation, and when he passed through the gate and sounded the bell he did so without a tremor of shyness.

The aged housekeeper looked at him the way most people looked at him, with that eye-squint of uncertainty he'd learned to counter-

act, as he did now, with a disarmingly boyish smile. He asked for Goring and when the housekeeper wanted to know his name he said merely that he was a friend of Penelope's.

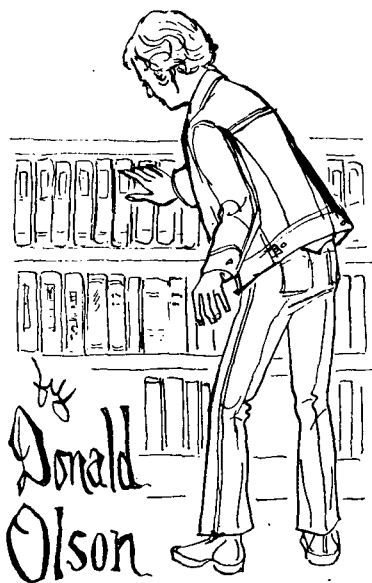
The woman looked at him oddly for a moment but then responded with a comprehending chirp of approval. "Friend of Penelope's, are you? Oh, ha-ha, yes, I see. Well, come in, then, come in. I'll see if he's still up."

He glanced behind him before following her inside and in a flash of silvery lightning noticed once

more how totally isolated the house was.

She returned in a few moments and conducted him to a room at the head of the stairs, leaving him outside the open door.

With the greedy eyes of a traveler overjoyed to be home again, he tried to take in everything at once: the shelves of books, the huge mahogany desk, the marble fireplace, the picture of the young girl over the mantel, so that it was all a shimmery blur made worse by the tears filming his eyes, those dreamy slate-colored eyes that betrayed the presence of some wound or flaw or sorrow



lurking just below the surface of his personality.

There was Goring himself, dear old Uncle Dev, with the familiar white hair and moustache, bushy brows and tame-lion eyes.

Goring waited for his tonguetied caller to speak. When he did not, he lifted a frail hand from his blanketed lap and beckoned the young man closer.

"I'm Goring, Mr . . . ?"

The visitor stepped eagerly forward to clasp the outstretched hand, somewhat startling Goring, making him feel uncomfortably like St. Peter in the Vatican, fearing for a moment that the fellow might be going to kneel and kiss his toe.

Instead, he moved back as if to give the older man a better look at him and said, with his too-generous smile: "Don't you recognize me?"

Goring stared, murmured an apology.

"I'm Jack!"

"Jack? Hmm . . . I'm still afraid . . ."

"Jack. You know—the Mysterious Stranger!"

Goring's hand rose to his eyes. "I'm afraid you still have me at a disadvantage, young fellow. An old man's memory . . ."

The caller looked more impatient than annoyed. "Gee, I recog-

nized you right away. You're just like I knew Uncle Dev would be."

Goring became alert now in a more than socially attentive way. "Wait a minute. You don't mean you're—not *our* Jack."

As he said this he waved toward a certain shelf of books directly behind the desk. The visitor pounced on them, ran trembling fingers across their brightly jacketed spines.

"Yes! Jack, the Mysterious Stranger. I'm him!"

"Are you indeed? Well, fancy that." Although truly flabbergasted, a well-trained imagination helped Goring maintain his aplomb.

A blunt-tipped finger plucked one of the volumes from the shelf. "*Penelope and the Coral Reef*. Wow! That was super. But I don't see how Penelope could have thought I was one of the *bad* fishermen. I kept trying to warn her about Chang. But she kept running away."

He raced on in this vein, darting from one book to another, from *Penelope and the Deadly Amulet* to *Penelope and the Enchanted Valley*, from *Penelope and the Tavisham Ghost* to *Penelope and the Smugglers' Revenge*, recalling delightedly how in each adventure he had come to Penelope's rescue.

Goring listened to all this with an emotion so singular he could not have defined it; it was as if one of his characters had magically come to life and burst through the study door to confront him at the very spot where Goring had created him. The emotion was certainly disturbing but not ungratifying. Recognition he'd had, to a degree, but this was in its way the supreme compliment.

The *Penelope* books, some two dozen of which had been published over the past couple of decades, had grown out of a simple story he'd written to amuse his young niece, based on one of his archaeological expeditions. He would never have tampered with the stories' formula—his teen-age readers would not have tolerated it—and in each book Penelope would accompany Uncle Dev to some distant spot and be plunged into an exotic, danger-filled adventure. A conventional figure in each of the plots was a shadowy young man named Jack, a Mysterious Stranger who invariably popped up when Penelope was about to be fatally bitten by a cobra, suffocated in a mine cave-in, drowned in a scuttled yacht, or shot in a bandit's hideout. Any young reader of average intelligence could have told Penelope—

Goring had scores of letters to prove it—that ever since *The Opal Talisman* adventure Jack had been wildly in love with her, yet she remained, book after book, annoyingly oblivious to his affection.

Only now did the visitor become aware that Goring was in a wheelchair.

“Did that bullet wound in *The Mandarin’s Hatchet* really injure you, sir?”

Goring sighed and was on the point of explaining that nothing more dramatic than degenerative arthritis accounted for his condition when the caprice seized him to humor the lad’s delusion.

Or was the impulse quite that innocent?

It was second nature to Goring to invent fictional plots and already certain elements of a curious scenario may have been shaping themselves in his mind, a mind grown bitter with jealousy and illness.

So he said, “Not really, no. It was that fall in *The Temple of the Sun Dragon*, remember? When I fell down the thousand and one steps?”

The man who thought he was “Jack” looked sympathetic to the point of tears. Feeling guilty, Goring insisted his visitor tell him more about himself. “I could offer you some refreshments, but I told

Mrs. Harkins she could go to bed. And I’m quite helpless, as you see.”

The visitor’s face grew surprisingly hostile. “Is *that* why Penelope’s going to marry Howard Rashbrooke?”

‘Goring’s mind, until now only toying with that dangerous scenario, not really believing he could connect those various elements, seized upon the young man’s hostility with furtive delight, as if the key to that shadowy plot had suddenly dropped into his hand.

“Er—no. No, of course not.”

“Because she mustn’t, you know. Rashbrooke’s nothing but a fortune hunter. Can’t you *see* that?”

The sorrows which had been Goring’s only company ever since Sheila had begun the affair with Harry Lawton, the affair she thought Goring knew nothing about, were momentarily forgotten, the pain no pills could conquer half-forgotten.

“Rashbrooke claims to be in love with Penelope,” he said slyly.

“Penelope *can’t* love *him*. She loves *me*. She always has, ever since I kissed her in *The Opal Talisman*. She slapped my face, sure. Any decent girl would have done the same thing if a mysterious stranger kissed her. But she never

forgot that kiss. No! She can't marry Rashbrooke. She can't!"

The young man had jumped to his feet and assumed a pose, legs apart, fists jammed against hips, which Goring recognized as characteristic of Jack. For a moment he felt a bit like Frankenstein and, like Frankenstein, he had passed beyond the point where he might still have abandoned his perilous experiment. It was as if fate had sent him this instrument, this human tool.

Goring implored the visitor to sit down. "You were going to tell me about yourself. How did it begin? I mean, when did you first know?"

"That I was Jack? Gosh, ages ago. When I was still in the orphanage. The other kids, they liked *Tom Swift* and *Nancy Drew*, but the minute I read *Penelope and the Jade Tiger* . . . well, Jack was *me*. He looked like me and he was an orphan and he never belonged anywhere. I must have read that book twenty times. And the others . . . all the others."

Goring was silent, watching the emotions glide swiftly over his visitor's young-old face, while outside the window the artillery rumble of thunder drew closer, and rain, like cold-fingered refugees fleeing before the guns, tapped urgently upon the pane. In

spite of what he knew he was going to do, Goring was still deeply touched by the young man's tale, never dreaming that his unambitious labors could have wrought so lastingly vivid an effect upon a childish mind. How dismaying to realize that he had provided another human being with so total an escape into fantasy.

The caller's voice droned on. ". . . and when I read *The Missing Cipher* last month and Penelope actually got *engaged* to Howard Rashbrooke I knew I had to do something. I couldn't let it happen. I knew I had to come here and find her and tell her I love her . . . Where is she, Uncle Dev? Where's Penelope?"

Goring's mind was busy with the various aspects of his scenario that must be made coherent and viable.

"Tell me, Uncle Dev.. Where is she?"

Where indeed? *No motion, has she now, no force, she neither hears nor sees* . . . Only her name in real life was Polly, that adored little niece who had died in Goring's arms, and with her had died the only thing in the world he'd ever truly loved. He had been unable to keep Polly alive, but he could be sure that Penelope, the shadow child of his imagination whose adventures had so en-

thrall'd his little niece, would never die.

This reminded him of Sheila and a wave of hatred darkened his face.

"Uncle Dev? *Where is Penelope?*"

Goring knew it was his last chance to tell the truth, his last chance to scrap the grisly scenario in his mind. And what if he did? What if he were to tell "Jack" that all this time he had been idolizing a dead girl? What effect might such a revelation have on his already clouded mind?

The thunder, closer now, as if the furious armies in the sky were battling above the very roof, seemed to echo the words: "*Where is she, Uncle Dev?*"

"She's not home this evening, Jack. She had to go out."

"With *him*?"

"No. Not with him. She went to visit a sick friend."

Sheila, damn her, had insulted his intelligence with the same brazen excuse. A sick friend! Did she think he was senile, that he would swallow as phony an excuse as that? But then, it gave her pleasure to insult his intelligence just as it gave her pleasure to see him sitting in that wheelchair, helpless and vulnerable and so totally at her mercy.

"That's just like Penelope," the

young man murmured. "Where is she, Uncle Dev? Tell me how to get there."

"If you found her, what would you do?"

"Why, tell her, of course."

"That you love her?"

"Yes."

"And want to marry her?"

"Yes!"

"What if she refused?"

"She wouldn't. She loves me."

"But what if she did?"

"I'd kill myself!" All his utterances were as melodramatic as a child's, and as artlessly sincere.

"Ah, my boy, it's no good. She has to marry Rashbrooke whether she wants to or not."

The young man was actually trembling with excitement. "You're wrong, Uncle Dev! I'll help her escape. Like I always do."

"You don't understand, lad. You don't know what Rashbrooke is."

In Goring's mind the scenario assumed its final shape.

"He's nothing but a lousy fortune hunter, Uncle Dev."

"He's more than that. Much more." Goring pointed to the manuscript on the desk. "It's not finished. But read the title."

A sudden shattering clap of thunder seemed to make the house tremble on its foundation as the young man picked up the

manuscript and looked at it, his lips shaping and reshaping the words before speaking them aloud. "*Penelope and the Final Escape* . . . I don't get it, Uncle Dev. *Final escape*? That doesn't mean—"

"Marriage will bring Penelope's adventures to a logical conclusion."

Not his idea, never his idea; if he'd had anything to say about it Penelope's adventures would never end, not so long as he had breath in his body. Only he didn't have anything to say about it; he was powerless to cope with Sheila, the woman who had entered his house for the first time as a hired secretary when arthritis had afflicted him shortly after the fourth *Penelope* book and who, as his wife two years later, was writing the books herself. No one knew, of course, not even his publisher; she had become an expert at aping Goring's style. As the royalties had rolled in in greater and greater abundance she had grown indifferent to Goring and his suffering and had begun the affair with Lawton almost under his nose, until finally a day had come when she declared that she was sick of Penelope and she had embarked upon *The Final Escape*, intending to bring the series to a close.

Now Goring wheeled himself to

the young man's side and calmly took the manuscript from his hand. "You remember Anaxos in *The Greek Uprising*?"

"Sure. He was one of Chang's men."

"Well, so is Rashbrooke."

The effect of this upon his visitor was enough to make Goring lower his eyes in shame even while his heart pounded with excitement.

"But, Uncle Dev, you can't let her do it!"

Goring spread his hands. "I'm helpless, as you can see. There's nothing I can do."

Gradually a sly, deliberate smile swept the anxiety from the young man's face. "I'm not helpless, Uncle Dev. I can help her get away from Rashbrooke just like I helped her escape from Anaxos."

Now that he could no longer dismiss it, Goring tried to tell himself that the idea for this monstrous scenario wasn't really his at all, but something evil and hideous spawned by the Devil of Pain that had made its home in his crippled body.

"You'd be risking your life, Jack. If you were caught they'd never believe you. You know what they'd say, don't you? That Penelope and Rashbrooke are only figments of the imagination, characters in a book."

The caller's smile grew noticeably slier. "That's what Mrs. Brooks said when I went back to visit her once at the orphanage and told her all about my adventures. She said I was all mixed up. She said they were only characters in a book. And you know what I said, Uncle Dev? I said, if they're not real, then I'm not real either. She couldn't argue with *that*. That stumped her, let me tell you. Because I was right there talking to her and she couldn't say *I* wasn't real."

The hideousness of what he was doing brought a cold sweat to Goring's hands. "Go away, boy. While there's still time. Forget about Penelope."

"Where is he, Uncle Dev? Tell me where to find Rashbrooke. I'll take care of him just like I took care of Anaxos."

Once more his hand darted toward the desk, this time grabbing up a silver letter knife. "I don't have that Persian dagger I used on Anaxos, but this will do just fine." He smiled at Goring. "How do I find him, Uncle Dev?"

Goring looked very old and very tired. "You'd never find him. Not unless I called him and told him to come here."

Tiny flames burned behind the dream-scarred eyes. "Then call him, Uncle Dev. Right now."

With a curious, passive sense of having delivered himself into the power of an emotion he could neither understand nor resist, Goring picked up the telephone, then paused. "Listen, Jack, while I'm calling him you go downstairs and unlock the front door. Don't make any noise. We don't want to wake Mrs. Harkins."

As soon as the young man was out of the room Goring dialed the number with an aching, stiff-jointed finger. They would be together, of course, Sheila and Lawton. Suppose Sheila were to answer. But of course she didn't.

"Lawton? It's me, Goring. I've got to see you . . . Yes, yes, I know what time it is, but it's important . . . There's something I've got to tell you. About Sheila. Something she mustn't know. You've got to come right now. Sheila's visiting a friend and I've got to see you before she gets home . . . Yes . . . The door will be unlocked. Come straight up to my study."

He hung up and pressed his fingers to his eyes. That would give the precious pair something to think about, and he'd come. He'd come running to find out what it was all about. Sheila would make sure of that.

When the young man returned his face was deeply flushed and

the paper knife still gleamed in his clenched fist. "Did you reach him, Uncle Dev?"

"Yes. He's on his way." Goring wheeled himself to the door. "Switch off that light, Jack. Just leave the desk lamp burning."

In its greenish glow Goring's face looked as dead-white as a cadaver's. "I'll wait in the next room. Be quick about it, and be silent."

The young man nodded, then spoke just as Goring opened the door. "Uncle Dev?"

Goring looked back at him.

"I just want you to know something. Whatever happens to me, this has been the happiest day in my life."

Goring quickly withdrew. In his darkened bedroom he opened a drawer in the bedside stand, removed the revolver which he kept there and slid it under the blanket on his lap.

He waited. The sound of thunder was now no more than a distant cannonade.

He didn't hear the car when it drove up and the first sound that reached his ear was a soft but impatient tap on the study door.

For perhaps a second or two he remained immobile, unbreathing, but the wild impulse of remorse which sent him hurtling toward the door came an instant too late.

The man he had said was "Rashbrooke" gave a muffled cry as the paper knife drove fiercely into his heart.

Goring froze, then reacted with the calm, fatalistic precision of a sleepwalker, gently pushing the door open wider, raising the gun and firing.

He was almost sure that the young man who thought he was "Jack" never knew what happened, never knew that it was Uncle Dev who killed him.

The sensation it caused was, of course, considerable, but not so great as it would have been had Goring permitted reporters to step foot upon the grounds. His story was simple. A young man had come to the house, Mrs. Harkins confirmed that she had let him in ("he had real funny-looking eyes") and taken him upstairs to Goring's study. Goring stated that the caller had babbled incoherently, seemed to have confused some of the *Penelope* stories with real life, and when Harry Lawton had arrived unexpectedly the young man had gone berserk, seized up a paper knife from the desk and stabbed Lawton in the heart. Before he could turn on Goring the older man had been able to reach his revolver and shoot the intruder.

Goring would remember with utmost satisfaction the look on his wife's face when she arrived home just as they were removing her lover's body from the study. He wondered, with no particular alarm, if she would tell the police that Lawton had received a call from Goring. If she did Goring was prepared to deny it, but he didn't really expect her to, since it would mean confessing that she had been with Lawton.

He was right. She said nothing about that call, not to the police and not to him.

Instead of aggravating his condition as it might have been expected to do, the events of that night had quite a different effect upon Goring, for days afterward his aches and pains seeming to enter upon a period of remission, raising his spirits to the point where he actually expressed a desire to return to work.

His wife stared at him in amazement. "Work? You?"

"Why not?"

"You haven't worked in years."

"Well, now I feel like working.

I've got two or three ideas churning around up here," and he gaily tapped his forehead.

"You're out of your mind," she said coldly. "Doctor Simpson would never approve. And you'd never stand the discomfort. That's why you hired me in the first place, don't forget. Every time you struck a typewriter key you winced with pain, and you know you were never any good at dictating your novels."

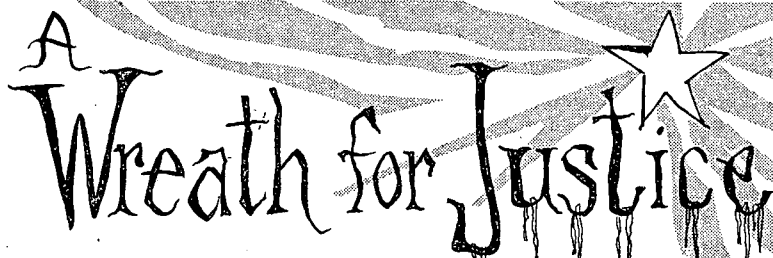
"Oh, I don't know. Maybe I didn't have the right *kind* of secretary."

He wheeled himself to the desk, picked up the unfinished manuscript of *The Final Escape* and with a look of infinite satisfaction calmly forced his crippled fingers to rip it into shreds.

"I've got a much better idea. How's this for a title? *Penelope and the Evil Bridegroom*. We'll take the little darling right up to the altar with that scoundrel and then, when things look absolutely hopeless, when there seems to be no conceivable way out of the situation—*enter the stranger!*"



Christmas exchanges rarely are made with such dexterity as this one.



A Wreath for Justice

by
Edward Wellen

Last year's leftover tinsel icicles did for this year's Christmas tree. Thomas Orth's hands hung the strips on the boughs. He watched the hands as though they belonged to someone else. Strange how you still went through the motions long after the meaning had gone. The few gift packages under the tree flaunted their false gaiety.

The doorbell rang.

An icicle of fear stabbed into his chest, freezing him through and through. Who, at this hour . . . ? Then he hurried, dripping tinsel, to answer before the doorbell rang again and wakened Lucy. He gaped on seeing who stood there—Kenneth Mathwick, Sr. himself.

Mathwick leaned forward, pushing his imposing presence at Orth. "Quick, let me in."

Still gaping, Orth gave way. As Mathwick stepped in and swung around to shut the door Orth saw he carried a briefcase in one gloved hand. He had brought the night chill in with him as well, and Orth shivered.

Mathwick looked past Orth. His eyes darted left and right. His voice came out a harsh whisper. "Your wife?"

"Lucy?" Orth felt stupid. After all, he had only one wife and her name was Lucy. "She's upstairs. Asleep."

"No one else here?"

"No." Orth spoke mechanically, his mind trying to unwhirl.

"Ah." He wasted a moment, drumming on his briefcase. Then he cleared his throat and put on the well-known Mathwick getting-down-to-business expression. "You know Judith Hillerin, of course?"

Of course, Orth reflected. She was the typist with the indolent look-how-I'm-put-together shape and the insolent I-dare-you-to-slap-me face.

Mathwick was waiting for him to answer. Now it was Orth's turn to clear his throat. "She's one of the typists, isn't she? Why do you ask?"

For some reason the worn star on the top of the tree held Mathwick's gaze. He spoke to Orth at last but kept his eyes on the star. "The office Christmas party—you were there this evening, weren't you?"

Orth's mouth slid slightly to the left. He was only a lowly slave and Mathwick Senior was Mathwick Senior, but had his presence at the party made so little impression? Mathwick's glance had passed over him several times, together with a fixed smile, and one of those times Mathwick had even raised a paper cup to him. Now it would seem that the board room had been, for once in the year, loud and crowded enough to joggle him out of Mathwick's sight and mind.

"I was there, but I stayed for only a drink or two. I would've liked to have stayed longer, but I felt I'd better leave early to be with Lucy."

"Yes, I can see how you would feel that way, especially on this night." Mathwick's voice went sentimental, almost mushily so, but his eyes sharpened. "How is your wife these days? I understand she hasn't been well for some time."

Orth still had enough courage in him from his drink or two at the party to draw himself up and try to stare Mathwick down. This was his castle and no outsider had the right to peer behind the arras—but Mathwick wasn't stare-downable.

"Well, the doctors haven't been able to find anything physically wrong with her, but she does have to take medication for her nerves."

The fire in Mathwick's eyes could have come from his mentally rubbing his hands. "Sad. Dismal for her and hard on you. Yes, that's what I had heard, that she's in this drugged state much of the time." Mathwick's eyes probed Orth's. "Then your wife would not be able to testify—I mean, say for sure—that you in fact left the party early and came straight home?"

Orth blinked. He opened his mouth, without having yet formed in his mind what he meant to say, but in any case Mathwick gave him no chance to speak.

"No, hear me out. You could say you stayed on at the office party till almost an hour or so ago, when it ended, and your story would hold up."

Orth spoke slowly, dragging it out of himself. "I suppose I could. But why should I?"

"Because something happened after you left." Mathwick's brow glistened. "I remember—and no doubt others remember—that the Hillerin girl was still full of life toward the party's end, when she dropped out of sight and I took it she had gone home or wherever. Junior and I were alone there at the finish. No one—aside from Junior and me, and now you—knows about it yet." He paused.

Orth had to force himself to ask. "Knows what?"

Mathwick's face twitched. "Junior tells me he was too drunk to remember actually doing it. All he knows is, when he came out of his haze he was alone with Judith in his private office and she was dead, with his letter opener thrust in her." Mathwick shuddered. "Awful. I didn't believe him till I went in and saw with my own eyes, and I still can't believe it."

He shuddered again. "The blood on the carpet."

Orth had always felt a dull hate for Junior ever since Junior had come into the firm, starting above Orth and rising from there. Grim pleasure overrode shock, then honest wonderment overrode grim pleasure. He stared at Mathwick and tried to read between the lines of his face. "Why come here and tell me? Why not go to the police?"

Mathwick drew in a lot of air, as though more for size than for speech. "Because I can't let Junior go to jail. That would end everything for me. Junior has too much to live for to let one mad moment jeopardize his whole future. I built the firm to last after my time." His gaze fixed on the star again. "I know everyone thinks I'm cold and hard. Maybe I am. But if I am it isn't because I'm selfish. All I've ever done I've done for Junior."

Orth couldn't help making the thrust. "Why don't you take the blame for him, then?"

Mathwick waved that away. "Everyone would know I couldn't have done it. For one thing, I had no opportunity. Too many employees hovered around me every minute of the evening." His gaze fixed on Orth. "So I need someone else. I need someone who would

not have drawn notice if he slipped away to the inner office with the Hillerin tramp. I need you."

"Me?" It came out a high-alto *mi*.

"It was an act of passion, a moment of madness. Too much to drink, and you're unused to drinking. Too much frustration at home, and you're faced with this temptation at hand. Perfectly understandable. Everyone knows the Hillerin girl was a teaser. Everyone knows you've always been a quiet person, a dutiful employee, a solid citizen. You'll get off lightly, especially if you come forward of your own free will. You're childless, you have a sick wife to care for. You have little to lose, a lot to gain. I'll give you—"

"You're out of your mind." There went his job, but Orth didn't care. He stared at Mathwick and anger surged. The man really thought that he should be willing to sacrifice himself for Junior, of all people. "Why should I—"

Mathwick cut him off with a gesture. "A million reasons." He opened the briefcase, playing it close to his chest, and withdrew a sheaf of bonds. "I had these in my office safe. One million dollars in negotiable securities. Bearer bonds. See for yourself."

He placed the bonds on Orth's palm, which found itself coming up to receive them. Orth studied the bonds. They were the real thing and they would add up to a million, maybe more in a rising market.

Mathwick drew out of the briefcase a stiffly rolled handkerchief which he unfolded to lay bare a letter opener with a three-inch-deep dark red stain on the daggerlike blade. "What do you say? Your prints on the handle in exchange for a million dollars."

There was a long silence and a long stillness, then slowly, slowly, Orth's other palm rose.

Mathwick breathed out an invisible heaviness, then his voice grew brisk. "No, your other hand. You're right-handed, aren't you?"

Orth nodded numbly and switched the bonds to his left hand. Mathwick placed the letter opener on Orth's right palm. Orth held bonds and opener as though weighing them in the balance, then closed his hand over the hilt.

Mathwick sandwiched Orth's hand between his and pressed it hard to the hilt as though molding clay. After making sure each finger had good contact, Mathwick freed Orth's hand. Orth opened his hand. Mathwick's waiting handkerchief swallowed the letter opener carefully and the briefcase

swallowed both—with finality.

"I'm really deeply grateful to you, Thomas, and I'll see that you get the best counsel around. All you have to do now is give me an hour to take care of . . . replacing the letter opener, then turn yourself in."

Mathwick strode to the window, parted the curtains, and looked out. "I parked my car around the corner to make sure no one would see it in front of your house. And I made sure no one saw me come in. Now I'm making sure no one sees me leave."

He nodded farewell at Orth and put his hand on the doorknob.

Suddenly a suspicion seized Orth, convulsing his grip on the bonds and screeching silently at him to snatch back the letter opener before it was too late. "Hold on, Mathwick."

Kenneth Mathwick, Sr. turned his head and lifted an eyebrow. "Eh?"

"How do I know this isn't all a frame?"

Mathwick frowned. "What do you mean, all a frame?"

The words rushed out. "I mean how do I know you won't try to have your cake and eat it too? Now that you have my prints on the letter opener, what's to keep you from bolstering the case

against me and at the same time getting your million dollars back? How do I know that after you . . . replace the letter opener, and they find Judith that way, you won't discover that the bonds are missing from your safe? I'd never be able to prove that you made this visit and that we closed this deal. So how do I know you won't lead the police to believe I killed Judith, not in a mad moment—because, as you said, I'm the quiet type—but more believably in desperation when she caught me robbing your safe?"

Mathwick shook his head. "The thought never entered my mind. I give you my word." He turned the knob.

"Not so fast, Mathwick. Whether or not it was there before, or would've come to you on your way back to the office, the thought's there now. So we'll settle it now."

Mathwick almost hissed with impatience. "I've no time to sit down and reason with you. I need to get back before one of the night people stumbles on the body. There's always that chance, though I locked the door to the office. You'll just have to trust me, Orth." With an air of finality he made to go.

"Mathwick, I said to hold on." Was that his own voice, so sud-

denly hard and menacing? It had stopped Mathwick. "I can phone the cops and have them at the office before you get back to it."

Mathwick looked at Orth and for the first time gave him a nod of respect. "What do you suggest, then?" He frowned, but not angrily. "How can I satisfy you that I won't double-cross you?"

Orth found himself ready with the answer. "Write me out a note saying you're giving me the bonds of your own free will in payment for services rendered. If you're leveling with me I'll never have to show the note."

Mathwick's frown deepened. Then he erased it, sighed and let his shoulders droop. Though he had wiped his frown, suddenly he looked his age and more.

Yet he had control of himself—Orth had to give him that. Mathwick's hand did not tremble noticeably as he wrote. There was nothing more to say, except with their eyes, and they parted silently.

A wind had risen, and it took Orth a good solid slam to close the door after Mathwick. Orth's heart thumped an echo. Sure enough, in answer to his listening he heard the springs of Lucy's bed and her drugged footsteps moving to the door of her room.

"Who was that you were talking to?" she asked.

"Santa Claus."

One thing Lucy lacked was a sense of humor. He hadn't expected her to laugh, and she didn't; he had expected her to go on talking, and she did. Her tone was querulous; he wasn't listening to her words.

His free hand still held the feel of the hilt; he rubbed it against his thigh. He had to find a safe place for the bonds and the note before the police came for him or he turned himself in. The sheaf grew heavy in his hand, but its heaviness took a weight off his mind. *A million dollars.*

A million dollars could buy Lucy the best medical care. A million dollars could buy him a new life after he served his time.

Thomas Orth looked at the star on the tree without seeing it. He saw himself touching Judith Hillerin's look-how-I'm-put-together shape, saw himself trying to kiss Judith Hillerin's I-dare-you-to-slap-me face, heard Judith Hillerin's mocking voice, saw red, then saw blood, and lastly saw his hand drawing away from the letter opener in Judith Hillerin's body.

A million dollars could even buy the truth.

Here, one must recall Scott's admonition:
And many a word, at random spoken,
May soothe or wound a heart that's broken!

Ms. Found & Patrolman

I confess I'm slightly confused by Lila Potterman's attitude, even a bit dizzied by her complete about-face. Because I am that truly unique creature in these chaotic times—the RATIONAL human being—I am writing down this objective account of our evening together so that I can figure out her puzzling behavior.

First, without false modesty, let me declare that I *am* an eligible bachelor. I have no trouble meeting and attracting women. This account is in no way a traditional Lover's Lament.

I am tall, dark and, yes—I admit it—even handsome. Then too, I am a noted doctor, which by itself assures my social success.

These qualifications, however,

meant nothing to Lila Potterman. She has the true scientific mind that cuts through sentimental garbage masquerading as fact in our society; but perhaps to understand my admiration for her I should begin with an account of my life's dedication, a dedication that stops at nothing.

I am a man of strong principles, devoted to abolishing dangerous traditions. Not as a profession, of course—the world isn't ready for that yet—but as a hobby. As a scientist, I have seen that certain outmoded concepts of honor and humanity spread across the earth like contagious diseases, and hold back the progress of the human race.

Love, Piety of Motherhood, Free-

dom, Man's Dignity—all false issues; look at the facts of war, overcrowding, crime.

We have to change the people who carry diseased traditions (primarily mothers), and start anew with enlightened people to create a more thoughtful world. Reconditioning; possibly we will even have to eliminate large groups of incurables.

What does this have to do with Lila Potterman? Well, let me explain.

Carole Rosenthal

The creation of a new world is a mammoth project, involving changes in the entire social structure. Frankly, it's tiring. Like other men with far-reaching goals, I want companionship; a helpmate to comfort me, physically and intellectually; a wife.

Where would I find one? Oh, I knew plenty of women. They flocked to me, honestly. I could practically see their lips moving to practice the magic phrase: "My husband, the doctor." Disgusting! Stupid perpetrators of tradition! When you considered that these women were also potential moth-

ers—well, you can plainly see where *that* leads.

I wanted a rational woman, someone who understood me, who wouldn't cringe from reality; a woman who could help, in some small way, with my plans for a new world. In short, someone exactly like myself—only female, of course.

How was I to meet this woman? Clearly, trusting to chance and circumstances was too much a hit-or-miss operation. These women—if they existed—must be rare. One could not meet them at parties or bars or even at dull scientific conventions. You couldn't spot them on the street, and grateful uncles recuperating from bladder operations—no matter how well-meaning—never provided them when they hooted: "What, a good-looking young guy like you not married yet? Have I got a niece for *you* . . ."

I had just finished eating dinner several months ago, and was turning the problem over once again in my mind as I settled down with my pipe and newspaper. Would cloning work, I wondered? Growing a complete duplicate of myself from one of my cells certainly had a strong appeal, no doubt about it. Still, even if the technique were perfected soon, could I wait twenty-odd years for

my double to grow up? And he'd be male besides.

Suddenly my eyes lit upon a small heavily-bordered display ad in the back section of the newspaper.

"Computer-Mater!" it said in bold letters. *"The scientific method of matching minds! Our complete data-processing technique finds your perfect partner through the most up-to-date technology. Absolutely confidential!"*

I read the ad three times. Of course! Why hadn't I thought of it before? With the help of a *totally rational* machine, using systematically collected facts as raw data, I could find my female counterpart. I was so excited that I tossed restlessly in bed all night, and telephoned for an application form as soon as I got up in the morning.

However, two days later, when the form arrived in the afternoon mail, I eyed it with some dismay. A puffy pink cupid in the lower left-hand corner of the envelope was unleashing several crooked arrows at my name (misspelled) and address. I tore it open and read it in the elevator:

—Do you prefer a blonde, brunette, or redhead?
Check one.

—Do you prefer a mate in professions or in the arts?

Check one.

—Is your partner's I.Q. important? If so, check one:
100,110,120,130 . . ."

I snorted to myself and turned my front door key sharply. I.Q. indeed! What about the T.Q.? *Tradition Quotient!* That's what will turn the world from madness and destruction. Have useless old attitudes and responses been extinguished?

Remember, before you think that I abandoned the idea, that I hardly expected better from a commercial operation, designed to appeal to the general public. Therefore I had already prepared another, deeply-probing questionnaire, together with several pages of instruction for use. I attached these to a check and sent them off. Maybe . . .

A week later my bank informed me that Computer-Mater had cashed my check, and a letter arrived, promising partner-appraisal information soon. So the "maybe" became a "probably" in my mind, then, unaccountably, a "definitely."

I began to count on Computer-Mater. Images of my matching opposite spun through my head. I spent hours composing our dialogues, our dinner anecdotes, even our lovemaking. I was completely exhilarated, perhaps even a bit

carried away, for I decided to put my theories into practice. I would convert the women I already knew to rationality or . . . follow out the logical conclusion.

Unfortunately they were incurable, low T.Q.'s in every single case. No amount of patient reasoning could penetrate their foggy minds.

The first was an imaginary thread-lifter, who plucked, cooing, at my lapels and cut her eyes sideways at me incessantly. The second, plain and dumpy, kept talking about "security." The third—probably the worst of the lot and the one with whom I tried hardest—was a lanky sophisticate who kept gold-plated "His" and "Hers" ash trays in the bathroom. All tragic terminal cases.

Within the month, all three had expired of diseases stocked by the hospital research laboratory: Bubonic Plague, Botulism and Anthrax—in that order. The Anthrax, since it usually attacks sheep and cows, especially amused me; and it baffled even top medical minds in Manhattan. Isolating the toxins presented no difficulty for someone with my laboratory background.

Meanwhile, though, I had not heard from Computer-Mater again. The intellectual excitement generated by my experiments kept

me from depression, but I was beginning to worry.

Then one afternoon I returned home from the hospital and found the cupid-adorned envelope stuffed into the back of my mailbox. Nervous excitement prickled on my palms. I licked my lips and tore it open.

"Dear Sir: (it began)

Your case is under careful consideration. Although we do not presently have a mate meeting your qualifications, the machine is carefully processing and screening applicants for your standards of compatibility. Be patient. You will hear from us shortly.

Yours with high hopes,

The Date-Mating Processor."

I was—rationally—prepared to wait. I rarely get apprehensive or edgy, but by midnight I found the words of the medical journal in front of me were blurring. At the back of my neck, muscular tension tightened like a thick knot. My plans—if not those for all mankind—seemed to hang so fragily. What would I do if this scientifically-developed method didn't work?

I had exhausted my resources. Had I, perhaps, been too impulsive? Was the world right and was I wrong? Well, it was too late to turn back. According to the con-

ventional universe I was merely a criminal.

So when morning came, I renewed my determination. Clamping my teeth tightly onto my pipe stem, I dialed Computer-Mater. Two rings and a brief, staticky silence, then a crisp, feminine voice came on the line, offering to help me.

"Look," I said, speaking slowly and distinctly, "this is more important than you realize . . ." and I outlined the procedure I followed in sending in the questionnaire, making appropriate threats about the Better Business Bureau.

"Just a moment, please. I'll get your file."

The telephone wire was coiling around my ankles and I stepped over it, sitting down in a straight-backed chair. In a minute she was back.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but our data-processing crew was just running early-morning applicants through the computer. None of them come very close to your qualifications."

"You've already cashed my check," I reminded her.

"Yes," she said, "but so far we haven't located any applicants fitting your needs. You want someone unencumbered by social con—"

"Let me speak to the company

president," I said firmly. One always wastes time with secretaries.

A brief pause; then the crisp voice continued, cutting through my rage. "I am the president of Computer-Mater and I have all the necessary information in front of me. Your anger is a pointless waste of energy since all possibilities are being thoroughly investigated. The problem is yours, rather than the computer's."

My pipe fell to the floor. The stem snapped and the bowl rocked crazily.

"Do you mean there's nobody for me? It's impossible that—"

"You're not listening carefully," the voice said sharply. "I said we had no *applicants* meeting your needs. However, I personally supervised your case, because I found your standards quite admirable. When our Mater rejected all of the people we fed into it, I thought of one person who might be your match. Someone who hadn't made formal application, but—"

"Yes?"

"For my own interests as well as yours, I filled out a supplemental questionnaire and sent it through the computer. The result was," she exhaled gently, "a success. Computer-Mater has matched us. We are mirror opposites, agreeing on virtually every

subject introduced into the machine."

There was a silence, the awed silence that attends birth.

"Well," I said.

"My name is Lila Pottermán," she said.

"Well." I stood up, wiping my hands on my trousers. "Well, well, well." It was difficult to frame words on such an occasion. "Can I see you tonight? Dinner and a show?"

"Don't be silly! I'm free after 7:30, but let's not waste time with empty rituals of courtship. Obviously we want to assess each other's character and answer any questions we failed to feed into the computer. The evening should be devoted to discussion, don't you think?"

I agreed. We made our arrangements and I hung up the phone. A sensible woman!

At the appointed hour, I met Lila Pottermán at a cocktail lounge downtown, one of those arty little Village places where people are encouraged to mar the wooden tables and beams with crudely carved hearts and initials. The irony of such a setting appealed to my sense of humor. She was sitting near the back, an ice-blond with long, loose hair and a pink cashmere sweater draped around her shoulders.

I slid into the booth opposite her. Her eyes were pale and crystalline and she cocked her head to one side as I frankly appraised her.

"Are physical appearances that important to you?"

"Not at all," I said stiffly. Nevertheless, for some inexplicable reason, I was pleased by her good looks. Aesthetic appeals, I decided, could not be hastily dismissed in creating a new world. What, for instance, if we had children?

As if she read my mind, she began talking.

"Do you believe in eugenics? I think we have to define our convictions immediately. Simple physical and personality attraction is insufficient for our relationship, and I'm interested in knowing where you stand on certain important issues."

I signaled to the waiter and ordered drinks.

"I stand against tradition," I said simply.

She nodded, and leaned back so that the sweater slid from her shoulder and revealed a graceful white arm. "So do I," she said. "In fact, I believe that old values are simply perpetuating themselves out of inertia, even though they have lost their validity. But have you thought of what would



happen if we peeled away slushy traditions? Would you personally object, for example, to the idea of starting from scratch?"

She wet her lips with a delicate pink tongue and leaned forward on the edge of her seat as she waited for my answer.

"Do you mean—" I began.

She rocked her head in assent. "I know you understand my meaning," she said. "According to our Mater we have common goals. We're almost exactly alike in our thinking. How would you propose

to eliminate the old consciousness?"

I nodded and cleared my throat. Her concern for the problems of mankind made her eyes sparkle in the most delightful way. Her cheeks colored with excitement as I explained my ideas. She was following all the complexities of my theories perfectly.

As we sat, talking there in the dimly-lit cocktail lounge, I felt remarkably happy. Surrounded by the vestiges of useless tradition we, two visionaries, were able to

see a clear light beyond.—Lila Potterman had been well worth waiting for. I even caught myself trying to steal furtive glances at her shapely legs.

At one hour past midnight, we adjourned to her apartment to continue our conversation. I was a little intoxicated—elated perhaps—by the lucid quality of our communication, and while Lila prepared a late dinner for us both, I congratulated myself on the foresight that had brought us together. We were just finishing our steak *au poivre*, when Lila unfolded her ripe lips and smiled challengingly at me.

“So far we’ve been in agreement on every single point,” she said slowly, “but there’s one thing I’ve been wondering about. It’s easy to *talk* about getting rid of people, and your theories—which I share—are terribly practical. But how do I know, when it comes right down to it, that you have the courage of your convictions?”

I met her eyes and grinned. I knew the answer to that question well enough. Hadn’t I proved my objectivity when I took care of those three pesty women? But how would Lila react if I told her? Could I trust her objectivity and freedom from cultural values?

“I really must know this,” Lila said, “if we’re going to consider

seriously a permanent match. I’d be hampered by someone who turned back at the crucial moment, because I believe in completing each necessary step of my convictions.”

I tightened my lips, and with a slight inward tremor, I made my decision. I would risk it! I might lose her either way.

“Well,” I began, looking down at the table, “I *did* have three girlfriends who passed away lately . . .”

Soon, I had told her the entire story of how I developed the Tradition Quotient for measuring them, how I tried to convert them to rational thinking, and how—when they proved incurable traditionalists—I refused to compromise my principles.

The mercy killings (for I had decided it was at least that) struck Lila as particularly amusing; her breath quickened as I outlined the details. Dark lashes cast fringed shadows on her cheeks.

“But how did you administer disease toxins to them?” she wanted to know. “Wasn’t it dangerous?”

“Not at all.” I straightened my shoulders under her admiring gaze and slid my chair closer to hers, so that my knee pressed against her thigh. “You see, I simply placed the isolated toxin on the

point of a pin, and attached it to a corsage. Near the end of the evening, I insisted upon adjusting the corsage on their dresses. Those women were so flattered by my attentions that they never even minded when I accidentally jabbed the pin into their skin."

She laughed aloud, shaking her long blonde hair back and forth.

"The medical diagnosis was natural death, of course," I said.

"How traditional of you! You said it with flowers."

I smiled, and she ducked her head to conceal the rising color in her cheeks.

"You didn't bring me flowers," she said.

I smiled at her coyness.

"Shouldn't you always be prepared?"

I took her hand under the table. "Let's not beat around the bush any longer," I said. "Now that you see my dedication, let's make plans for a future together."

Her body leaned closer to me, and I felt her warm breath as she bent her face near mine. She spoke softly.

"Yes," she breathed, "we're a good match, an even match. My computer will be invaluable in our research and experiments, and we can do so much together. Through Computer-Mater alone, I've recorded the attitudes of

thousands of New Yorkers, and we can reprogram the machine to tabulate them. On your own, it would take four years to find these people and to measure their T.Q.'s. But together, with my computer, we can do it in days!"

I squeezed her hand passionately. My voice rose with excitement.

"Perfect! Perfect!" I said, with more ardor than I had ever experienced. "We can't possibly fail! I bless my rationality in ever finding you. You're the one perfect woman to stand behind me in my plans! You will aid me and work with me as I put into effect: Operation Future!"

Was it my imagination, or was Lila withdrawing her hand from mine?

"Stand behind you?" she said.

"As a wife," I said, oddly confused by the way her voice flattened. Perhaps she needed more reassurance. "I'll put the plans into effect and you'll see that things run smoothly on the home front."

Her eyes narrowed and she shifted her body away from me. "What do you mean 'home front'?" she asked.

"Not the *literal* home front." I was afraid I'd offended her. "You know I don't believe in that. I mean that you'd take care of

background details, handling the kind of thing a woman can do best."

Lila stood up and ran her hand through her hair. Her tongue clicked gently against the roof of her mouth. "Male supremacy is a myth," she said. "That's the most mindless tradition of all!"

We finished our meal slowly and in silence. This was our first quarrel; it hung heavily in the air. By the time Lila brought in the dessert, I was beside myself with apologies, but I couldn't take back what I'd said. Anyway, I thought, defending myself as she sat opposite me with her face stony, her eyes downcast, I'm not so sure that what I said needed apologies. There are certain biological verities.

Still, I didn't want to lose Lila Potterman. The computer had matched us—and, I confess, I was growing fond of her. I only wanted her to stop crossing and recrossing her long, beautiful legs, to stop repeating, "Mindless traditions have no place in an enlightened world!" Had she no forgive-

ness in her at all? Not one grain?

Finally, not knowing what else to do, I left, deciding to give her a few days to get over her anger.

That's the end of my chronicle of what happened this evening. If I was dizzy when I started this, I'm even dizzier now, but since I've tried to be as objective as possible, recording all the details, I'm sure that when my head clears I'll find the clue that will make this whole thing fall in place for me.

Oh yes, before I lie down, one more thing. It doesn't make much sense, but maybe when I think about it . . . Her parting remark as she ushered me to the door was strangely traditional.

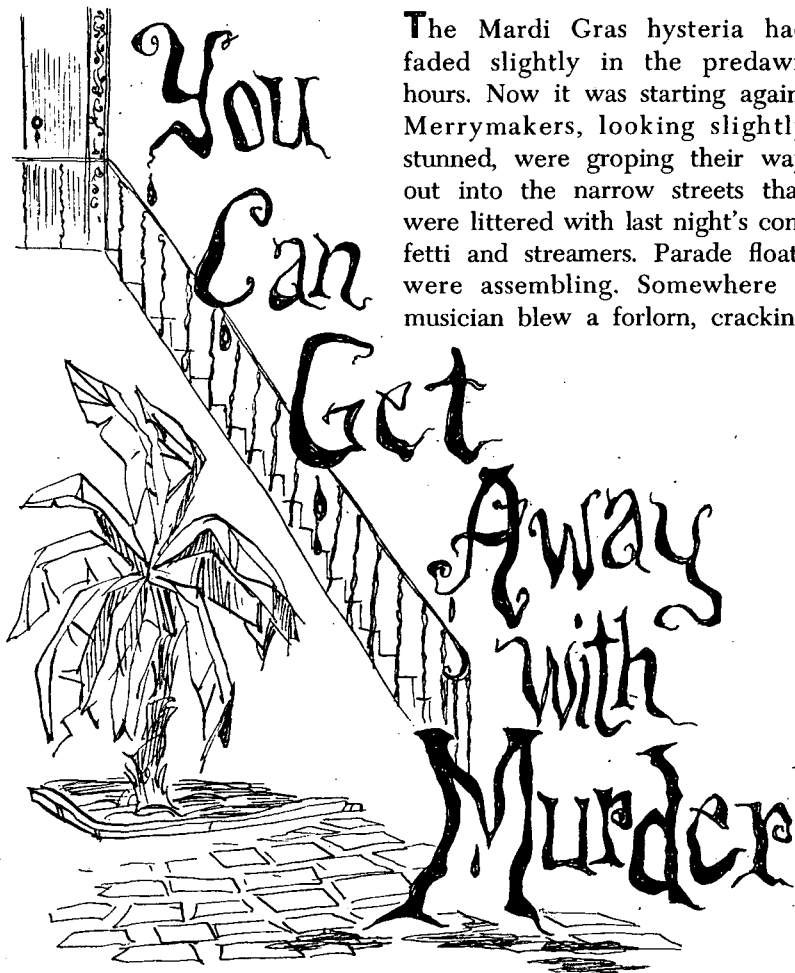
"The way to a man's heart is through his stomach," she said.

Does that mean she is interested in me?

Or does it mean I should have complimented her more on her cooking? But I couldn't have done so in all honesty. That dessert, for instance, left a very bitter aftertaste . . .



*One night, I suppose, term the right time and the right place,
in specific instances, as accessories after the fact.*



note on a trumpet. The whole city was gulping tomato juice and gin, shaking off last night's hang-over and bracing itself for the madness about to erupt again in the streets of New Orleans.

"Hell, Lieutenant, I've never seen so much blood in one room in my life." The uniformed officer was standing spraddle-legged on the bottom step of the courtyard stairway, like a bulldog guarding a bone.

Homicide Detective Lieutenant Mercer Basous, his long, homely face serious, cast a preliminary glance around the courtyard. The banana trees were dripping moisture. A night fog that had rolled in from the river, crossed Jackson Square and enveloped the French Quarter, had not entirely dissipated. Basous shivered. The town was chronically cold and damp—when it wasn't hot and damp. He sometimes wondered what had possessed those 18th Century Frenchmen to pick a swamp hollow below sea level upon which to build a town.

His gaze took in the bloodstains

splashed across the cobblestones to the courtyard gate in the west wall. The person or persons unknown who had shed blood in the room upstairs had enough left to splatter a trail on the stairs and courtyard.

Basous assumed that the small group of curious people huddled in the courtyard lived in the apartments surrounding the courtyard. They were in bathrobes and slippers.

"All you people live here?" he questioned.

A general murmur in the affirmative ran through the group.

"Anybody hear a disturbance up there last night?"

No response.

"Well, then, who called the police?"

A plump, middle-aged woman attired in a housecoat, her hair in curlers, moved slightly forward. "I did, Mr. Policeman. I am Mrs. Le Monnier, the landlady. I live there on the ground floor." She pointed across the courtyard to a door half hidden by vines and banana trees. "I came out this morning to get my paper, and the first thing I saw were those horrible bloodstains."

"Who lives up there?" Basous nodded at the apartment at the top of the stairs where the violence had taken place.

by Charles
Boeckman

"Bubba Noss rents the place. Hardly ever seen him here, though. He often lets friends use the room."

Basous took out his notebook and jotted down the name of the landlady and the apartment tenant. "Was he here last night?"

"Don't know. I don't pry on my tenants."

Somebody in the crowd made a derisive sound. She turned and glared at them.

Basous' partner, Lieutenant Roy D'Aquin, entered the courtyard from the north gate. "I had the dispatcher check it out, Mercer. Nothing at the morgue last night, and none of the hospitals got anybody severely cut up or suffering from loss of blood."

Basous nodded. "Roy, would you get statements from these people? I'll go take a look at the room."

He motioned to the young patrolman who turned and jogged up the stairs. Basous walked. He'd had a hard week.

The patrolman, opening the door for Basous, said, "I didn't enter the premises, sir. Just looked in. Didn't want to disturb any evidence or fingerprints."

"You're disturbing any fingerprints that might have been on that doorknob," Basous commented, nodding at the uniformed

officer's freckled hand grasping the outer knob.

The patrolman's face turned red and he drew his palm back, self-consciously wiping it on his trouser leg. Stiffly, he said, "I observed blood and the appearance of a struggle, but no person, alive or dead, was in the room."

"Anything else?"

"The room had an odor of cigarette smoke, whiskey and perfume, sir."

Basous took pity on the kid. He was trying very hard and was obviously fresh out of the academy.

"Very good, Officer. You did it all right by the book."

The patrolman beamed.

Basous took a single step into the room. A bed lamp had been left burning. He murmured an exclamation in his native Cajun French as he made his preliminary survey before moving farther into the room. The one-room efficiency had a kitchen alcove to the right. To the left, a door opened on a small bathroom. In the main room, a couch had been opened to make a bed. The sheets and pillows appeared to have been slept on. There was little blood on the bed except for a few splattered drops. Most of it was on the north wall, the floor, and the bathroom.

D'Aquin joined him. "Nobody

down there had a thing to say. Must have been a quiet murder or we have a bunch of sleepers. *Mon dieu!*" He looked around the room. "Looks like a convention of hemophiliacs got into a knife fight."

Basous began moving in slow, careful steps about the room, his trained eyes inspecting everything. Then he came to the bed. He studied it for a minute, bent over and sniffed the pillows. He took envelopes and a pair of tweezers from his coat pocket and carefully plucked some fallen hairs from the pillows and bed, placing them in individual envelopes, afterward sealing and labeling them. Then he slipped the pillowcases from the pillows, folded them and stuffed them into his pockets.

Basous and D'Aquin got on their hands and knees and, placing their cheeks close to the floor, sighted across it for any small objects the preliminary search might have missed. With an exclamation, Basous picked up a bit of plastic. He examined it for a moment, passed it on to his partner. "What do you make of it?"

D'Aquin frowned at the object. "Looks like a contact lens that got dropped and stepped on."

"Yes, I think that's what it is." It went into an envelope.

Then Basous, who was a very

careful, deliberate man, and a confirmed believer in the value of keeping notes, sat on the side of the bed, placed his notebook on his thigh, and began writing. Following the date and address of the investigation, he wrote:

"Investigating officer reported bloodstains around room and on stairs leading down to patio and across patio. He also reported the odor of cigarettes, whiskey and perfume in the room. This was all confirmed by our inspection. Further examination revealed no weapon. Table and chairs were overturned. General appearance of a struggle. Bed had been slept in, apparently by a man and woman. One pillow smelled of perfume, and pillowcase had powder, lipstick smears, and a few strands of long, dark hair. The other pillowcase was slightly stained by hair oil and contained strands of shorter dark hair. Found on the floor near the bed was a small object which appears to be a piece of a contact lens. Effort had been made to remove fingerprints and other objects which might identify room's occupants. There was no ash tray, whiskey bottle or glasses which one would expect to find in the room. No articles of clothing."

He thought for a moment, then added: "Preliminary evaluation: possible rape-murder or lovers'

quarrel. Woman might have been killed and the body carried away and disposed of."

D'Aquin, who sometimes grew impatient at Basous' slow, deliberate methods asked, "Shall I put in a call to have a fingerprint man sent over from the lab."

"Yes. I have a feeling he won't find much, though. And of course we'll need the blood typed."

On the way down the winding iron stairway, D'Aquin observed, "Of course we don't *know* a crime was committed here."

"You think it was just a bad case of nosebleed?" Basous said dryly.

"Well, it could have been some kind of accident—"

"Then why did they go to the trouble to remove all traces of cigarettes, ash trays, bottles and glasses that must have been here, according to the odor in the air? No, an act of violence took place here last night," Basous said firmly.

When they reached the street, one of the early-morning Mardi Gras parades was passing by. A marching Dixieland band was playing "High Society" loudly. The sidewalks were already crowded.

D'Aquin took Basous' envelopes to the police laboratory while Basous spent an hour around the

neighborhood asking questions. He made one call that proved fruitful. Directly across the narrow cobblestone street from the courtyard's north entrance was an artist's shop and private gallery. The artist was Benjamin Wyle, a thin man with a bushy red beard. He had been open until long past midnight, trying to sell some of his paintings to tourists. Around two a.m. he had seen a man and woman unlock the courtyard gate and go in. The couple appeared to have been drinking and were on very friendly terms. He did not get a clear look at the man, but did see the woman and was able to describe her in detail. "She was a remarkably beautiful woman," he said.

"You're an artist," Basous pointed out. "Could you draw a sketch of her in color?"

"Yes, I think so. An artist doesn't forget a face like that."

The artist went right to work on the sketch. Basous went in search of breakfast. He found a small coffee shop not too jammed with tourists where he had pancakes and several cups of *café au lait*. When he returned to the artist's shop an hour later, Benjamin Wyle handed him the finished sketch. It was of a brunette woman about thirty years of age.

"I agree," said Basous. "A most

beautiful woman—very striking.”

He showed the sketch to the tenants of the courtyard apartments, but none had seen the woman. Then Basous battled his way through the Mardi Gras throngs now crowding the streets in ever-increasing numbers to police headquarters on South Broad, where he rejoined his partner, Lieutenant D'Aquin. He showed the sketch to D'Aquin, who whistled appreciatively. (D'Aquin was something of a ladies' man.) “What a shame to waste anything that looks like that.” Then he asked, “What do you want to do now?”

“Well, I think we ought to go talk to this Bubba Noss who pays the rent on the apartment, *n'est-ce pas?*”

From the landlady he had obtained the information that Bubba Noss ran a “head shop” for the hippie crowd in another part of the city.

“We'll have to go the long way 'round,” D'Aquin said, nodding at the crowded streets.

The day had turned overcast. A cold mist was in the air. Basous turned up his coat collar and trotted out to the car. D'Aquin drove. Mercer Basous was not fond of heavy traffic or crowds. Were it not for his job, which he liked, he would be happy to re-

turn to the small Arcadian village on the Bayou where he had been raised, and trap muskrats for a living.

Bubba Noss was six feet tall, weighed two hundred and fifty pounds, wore a full beard, beads and sandals, and did not like the police.

“No, I don't know who she is,” he said sourly, handing the sketch back to D'Aquin.

“Well, she was in your pad last night.”

“Man, lots of chicks are in my pad every night.”

“It looks very much like this one got herself murdered there,” D'Aquin said.

Bubba gave him a sullen, hostile gaze: “Look, I don't know what you're talking about.”

Basous glanced around the shop. It smelled of incense which was probably used to cover up the pot that was smoked there. The goods on display included fringed leather jackets, floppy brimmed hats, books and various other articles of clothing and paraphernalia favored by the hip subculture. Several bearded, sandaled youths were lounging about, giving the two detectives curious, unfriendly stares.

“Your apartment is covered with blood,” D'Aquin pursued.



"Somebody—we think this woman—got cut up pretty bad."

"Man, you've wiggled out. There ain't no blood in my pad." Then he exclaimed, "Wait a minute! Do you mean my place

over in the French Quarter?"

"You have more than one pad?"

"My living quarters are here, upstairs above the shop. I just keep that pad in the Quarter for kicks. You know, atmosphere. Sometimes when I or one of my friends want to impress an out-of-town chick, we take her there. Sometimes I let my customers and friends use it for a party. Man, all kinds of people have keys to that place."

"Where were you last night?"

"Here—upstairs. We had a big Mardi Gras party going on early in the evening."

"How about after midnight?"

Bubba's beard split into a toothy grin. "I was in jail. The cops come in and busted me and my friends for disturbing the peace. They thought we were smoking grass, but couldn't find any. I just got out of the slammer an hour ago."

"You have to admit," said D'Aquin, "that's a pretty good alibi."

"Yeah," Basous said, staring moodily at the Mardi Gras crowds as he and his partner drove back to headquarters. There, Basous went to the crime laboratory on the first floor.

"I've been going over this material you brought in, Lieutenant,"

the laboratory criminologist told him. "I'm typing a report, but I'll tell you what we've found so far. There were face powder, lipstick stains and perfume residue on one pillowcase. It was all easy to identify, but not of much value in tracing the person who used it. It's all of types widely used and distributed, though high quality, indicating expensive taste. The other pillowcase was slightly stained with hair oil of a type men use. The hair from that pillow was heavy with dark melamine pigment, indicating the man it came from had black hair. The longer hair picked from the pillowcase which had the lipstick stains was also heavily pigmented, but take a look at it through the microscope."

Basous bent over the instrument. He said, "No roots."

"Exactly. So we can be pretty certain it came from a human hair wig. Now look at this." He placed another slide containing a strand of hair under the microscope. "Notice the lack of pigment and the air spaces—the vacuoles. This is definitely from a blonde person. My educated guess is that the woman was wearing a brunette wig, but is actually quite fair—a natural blonde."

"Hmm," Basous murmured. "I'll have an artist make another

sketch of the woman as a blonde. How about that bit of plastic? My partner and I think it is a contact lens."

"It is. I sent a man to the optical shop and they were able to calibrate the prescription. Here it is." He handed Basous a piece of paper. "Oh, the blood in that room is type B negative."

"Thanks. Any fingerprints?"

"Not much luck there. Mostly smudges. Somebody went around wiping everything in sight."

"I figured as much, because, whoever it was carted off the bottle, glasses and ash tray. Well, many thanks."

Basous left the sketch of the woman with an artist who did some work for the police department, asking him to sketch her as a blonde. He checked with Missing Persons, but so far no male or female had been reported missing. Then he and D'Aquin went out for lunch.

Basous ordered Oysters Bienville with which he had a small bottle of Chablis. After the meal, both detectives had Louisiana coffee, black and heavy with chicory. During the meal, Basous acquainted D'Aquin with the information from the laboratory.

"So," D'Aquin summarized, "sometime between two a.m. and dawn, a blonde woman wearing a

dark wig went to Bubba Noss' apartment in the French Quarter with a man who had dark hair. They had a party, drinks, and then the woman, who had type B negative blood, got cut up awfully bad, probably killed."

"I don't see how anyone could lose that much blood and survive," Basous agreed.

"But we know it wasn't Bubba Noss because he was in jail at the time."

"Yes. From what he's told us, it could have been one of many people. Apparently his whole crowd of swingers use that place as a party room and shacking-up pad. Either the man or woman—or both for that matter—could have had a key."

D'Aquin said, "I guess it's up to us now to find out the identity of the couple, starting with the woman since we have a pretty good idea what she looks like."

"And we have the contact lens," Basous reminded him. "More than likely it belonged to the woman. She would be too vain to spoil her kind of looks with glasses. And with her obvious class, she could afford the best ophthalmologist in the city for the examination and contact-lens prescription. We can make the rounds of the doctors this afternoon and see if one of them rec-

ognizes her from the sketch."

"That might work. Unless, of course, she was from out of town, and there are an awful lot of visitors at Mardi Gras time—and unless the lens belonged to the man; or it was dropped by somebody else at a previous time."

"That's what I like about you, D'Aquin. You're always so damned optimistic."

They spent the afternoon plowing through the Mardi Gras crowds that were growing denser and drunker by the hour.

They went to seven ophthalmologists, and at the eighth office they struck pay dirt. They didn't even have to take up the doctor's time. The receptionist recognized the sketch—the blonde one—at once. "Oh, I'm almost sure that's Mrs. Arthur Turner . . . Linda Turner. She was in just last month."

"Was this the prescription for her contact lens?" Basous handed her the paper with the lens prescription.

"I can check her records." She went to a filing cabinet. In a few minutes she returned. "Yes. That's it."

Basous' homely face momentarily reflected his inner elation. "Could we have her address?"

She wrote the address on a slip of paper. "I do hope nothing

has happened to her, Officer?"

Basous did not reply. He and his partner returned to their car. Basous looked at the address and muttered a Bayou French exclamation under his breath. "She lived in the Garden District. Very posh address."

They drove to the address, parked in front of the house. Basous looked up at the sweeping lawn, the costly home with its plantation-style Ionic columns. "I don't look forward to this—telling the man that his wife shacked up with some dude in the Quarter last night and then got herself knifed and probably dumped in the river."

"Wonder why he hasn't reported her missing?"

"She probably gave him some story about going to visit friends or relatives, so he hasn't missed her yet."

They rang the bell. A maid ushered them into a parlor after Basous showed her his identification. He sat precariously on an antique chair and looked around at the grand piano and thick carpet and costly paintings, holding his hat between his hands.

Presently Arthur Turner, a man in his fifties, silver-haired, with a deep golfer's tan joined them. "Gentlemen—Mildred said you are from the police . . ."

"Yes." Basous looked uncomfortably at his partner. He was not very good at coping with things like this.

D'Aquin came to his rescue. "It's about your wife, sir," he said gently. "When did you see her last?"

Turner looked surprised. "About two minutes ago. We're having cocktails in the family room. Why are you asking about my wife?"

D'Aquin turned and stared rather foolishly at Basous, who thought his own expression must be pretty sheepish. Finally he cleared his throat and asked politely, "May we have a word with her, sir?"

"Well, I suppose so." Turner left the room, then came back immediately with his wife, a stunning blonde woman—Linda Turner.

The two detectives quickly rose. It was Basous' turn to clear his throat. "Pardon us for this intrusion, Mrs. Turner. Could you tell us where you were last night?"

She regarded him with a puzzled expression, looked at her husband, then again at Basous. "Right here at home with my husband. Why are you asking, Officer?"

Turner had put an arm around his wife. "We had a quiet dinner at home and spent the evening watching television; keeping away

from the Mardi Gras crowds, you know. Would you mind telling me what this is all about, sir?"

"Please excuse us for disturbing you. Perhaps it is a case of mistaken identity. We're just doing some routine checking . . ."

Out in the car, D'Aquin said, "She's lying."

"Of course she's lying. And her husband is covering for her. There is no question but that she is the woman in that sketch." Basous slapped his forehead. "*Mon dieu!* So it was the *man* who got his throat cut, and all the time we've been thinking it was the woman. But I simply cannot see how a woman could knife a man, then carry his body down the stairs and across the courtyard to the gate."

"Perhaps he staggered out of the room under his own power."

"Or the woman had help. Why would she kill him? Did he threaten to blackmail her? Or was it a matter of jealousy? Anyway, we can't arrest her yet. Everything is too slim and circumstantial. We don't even know who the man was. You know, I think we ought to check the list of everybody who got busted at Bubba's party last night. It looks very much to me like Linda Turner or the man she was with, or both of them, ran around with that crowd. Bubba's friends might

be more willing to talk to us than Bubba was, especially if we lean on them just a bit."

Back at the police building, Basous and D'Aquin went over the records of the arrests made at Bubba Noss' apartment the night before. They ran a check to see if any of those booked had a police record. Several did, and Basous selected the most promising. "Nikki Lane, Female. Age twenty-one. Several arrests. One conviction for possession of marijuana. Served time as a juvenile offender. Was on probation a year."

Basous said, "Let us pay a visit to Miss Lane. I see she lives in a little town on the other side of the river. It just so happens I am acquainted with a family-operated restaurant in that same village, which will not be overrun with tourists, and which serves some of the very best authentic homemade Creole gumbo you ever tasted. It will be about time for the evening meal when we get there."

D'Aquin laughed. "You do like your meals on time, Basous."

The Arcadian agreed.

They drove over the Huey Long Bridge and stopped at the small cafe in the village. They were served steaming bowls of Creole gumbo and when D'Aquin sampled his, tears filled his eyes. He quickly gulped a drink of

wine. "This is really fiery!"

"It's real Louisiana Cajun cooking," Basous said happily, beads of perspiration popping out all over his long, homely face as he ate the spicy dish with relish. "This gives a man the spirit to pole a pirogue all day and dance the *fais-dodo* all night."

After two large bowls of gumbo and several cups of black chicory coffee, Basous was ready to call on Nikki Lane. They found her address to be one of a row of unpainted shacks just below the levee. In the weed-filled yard were parked several motorcycles. When the detective knocked, a young woman with stringy blonde hair, dressed in blue jeans, barefooted, carrying a baby on one hip, came to the door.

"We'd like to speak to Miss Nikki Lane," said Basous.

Her expression was wary. "That's me. What do you want?"

Basous showed her his badge. Her expression turned to fright. "Listen, I'm clean. What are you bugging me about?"

"You were arrested last night?"

"That was a mistake. They busted us for disturbing the peace. They thought they were going to find some grass or smack. But we were clean. They let us go this morning."

"The point is, you hang around

with Bubba Noss and his crowd of swingers. Have you ever seen this woman? Does she come to Bubba's parties?" Basous showed her the two sketches of Linda Turner, both the brunette and blonde version.

"Is that all you want to know?" she asked.

"Yes—unless, of course, you decide not to cooperate. Then we might think of a lot of other things to question you about."

Relief showed in her eyes. "Sure, I know her. Why shouldn't I tell you?" She shrugged. She pointed to the brunette sketch. "That's Helen Davis. I've seen her at several of Bubba's parties."

"Did she ever tell you her name was Linda Turner?"

"I don't know nothin' about that. I know her as Helen Davis."

"Was she at the party last night?"

"Yes. But she left early. Before the fuzz raided the place."

"Was she with somebody?"

"Sure. Same guy she always comes with. Ron Giampietro."

"Ron Giampietro," D'Aquin muttered as they drove back across the Huey Long Bridge.

The name was familiar to both detectives. Giampietro owned a small strip joint on Bourbon Street, but his main activity was

being a bookie and small-time hoodlum.

"I wonder how a high-class dame like Linda Turner ever got involved with a shady character like Giampietro," Basous mused.

"His kind often attract women," said D'Aquin, who considered himself something of an expert on female psychology. "They get bored with their rich husbands and nice, safe routine at home. They go looking for adventure. A guy on the shady side, an outlaw, excites them."

"Well, if Giampietro took her to that French Quarter apartment last night, he either got himself killed or killed somebody else up there."

They parked as close as possible to the Quarter and got out and walked. The *Vieux Carré* was sealed off to automobiles during Mardi Gras. By now darkness had fallen, a cold, drizzling darkness, making the filigree ironwork on the balconies gleam and imparting a soft patina to the ancient, crumbling buildings, but the weather did not dampen the Mardi Gras spirit. The narrow streets—Bourbon, Chartres, St. Louis, Royal—were crowded from curb to curb with boisterous merrymakers, many of them carrying huge, drink-filled glasses. Jazz poured from every doorway, loud and

brassy, and not too much melody.

Basous and D'Aquin questioned the manager of Ron Giampietro's strip bar, The Blue Spot. No, he had not seen Mr. Giampietro since yesterday. No, he would not allow Mr. Giampietro's apartment to be searched without a warrant.

The two detectives went off in search of a judge who would issue a search warrant. It was nearly midnight when they returned with the warrant. Giampietro's apartment was across a walled courtyard behind the strip joint. His quarters were expensively furnished. Basous and D'Aquin spent an hour searching the premises with meticulous skill and patience. At last Basous found an item that was helpful. It was a notebook. He studied the names and figures entered in ledger-like style and uttered an exclamation when his eye fell on a particular entry.

"What is it?"

"Unless I am badly mistaken, I now know what happened. Ron Giampietro was indeed murdered last night and I know who had the motive and opportunity. Come on."

Basous hustled D'Aquin out into the streets again. The homely detective's long, lanky legs carried him plowing through the throngs. They had but a few blocks to walk to the artist shop of Ben-

jamin Wyle, situated directly across the street from the courtyard apartments which had been visited last night by Linda Turner, alias Helen Davis, and Ron Giampietro.

"Ah, Mr. Wyle," said Basous. "Still open, I see."

"Just trying to pick up a few bucks from the tourists, Lieutenant." He smiled, fingering his bushy red beard. "Did you find out who the woman was you were looking for?"

"Indeed we did. We also found out who the man was."

"Hey, that's good detective work. Who was he?"

"Ron Giampietro. You know him, Mr. Wyle?"

"Let me see . . . I think he owns a joint over on Bourbon Street."

"Come, you can do better than that, Mr. Wyle. In fact you placed a lot of bets with him. From the amount of money you owed him, I would say gambling is quite a passion with you."

The artist's face turned pale. "How did you know—"

"Mr. Giampietro kept a very good set of books. They show how much you'd lost and owed him. He has a reputation for leaning on people quite heavily when they can't pay their I.O.U.s. What did he threaten to do, Mr. Wyle?"

Break both your arms? Put out a contract on you? And was that why you went over there, knowing you could catch him off guard when he was having a romantic interlude with Mrs. Turner? You killed him and carried his body out and dumped it, probably in the river. You knew, of course, that Mrs. Turner wouldn't dare turn you in without compromising herself and her sordid affair."

The artist's face was now the color of a dirty gray bed sheet. "Now wait a minute—"

"Read him his rights, D'Aquin."

D'Aquin recited, "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used against you. You have the right to an attorney. If you can't afford an attorney—"

"Wait a minute!" Wyle half-screamed. "You're not pinning this on me." He wiped his sweating face with a handkerchief. "You're right about I.O.U.s. You're right about the threats Giampietro was making to me. He really had me scared. But I didn't kill him. Arthur Turner did that."

"What?"

"I recognized Mrs. Turner even with that brunette wig. I've seen her before. In fact, she and her husband bought a painting from me for that mansion they live in. So, when I saw her go up to that room with Giampietro, I put in a

telephone call to Arthur Turner. I told him if he'd come to the address I gave him, he would find his wife in bed with Ron Giampietro. I told him the west gate would be unlocked. The street on that side is not closed to automobiles. I have a key to the courtyard gates since I have an apartment there myself.

"This morning when you questioned me, I drew the sketch of Mrs. Turner, hoping you'd trace her and eventually charge her husband with the murder. Of course I had to draw her with the brunette wig in case another witness turned up. Still, anyone would recognize her if they really knew her."

Arthur Turner's car was searched the next morning. The trunk had been washed but careful inspection by the police laboratory turned up traces of type B negative blood. That evidence, along with the testimony of Benjamin Wyle—who had to be granted immunity from prosecution—plus others who knew of

the affair between Mrs. Turner and Giampietro would have been sufficient *corpus delicti*, even if Giampietro's body had not been eventually found floating in a bayou where Turner had dumped him. There was enough circumstantial evidence to convict Arthur Turner.

Apparently Mrs. Turner had been contrite, begged forgiveness, and Turner, a man passionately in love with his beautiful young wife, had forgiven her after he dispatched Giampietro.

Basous should have been happy with a case successfully solved but his homely face wore an expression even more dour than usual. "You know what really bugs me?" he said to D'Aquin.

"What?"

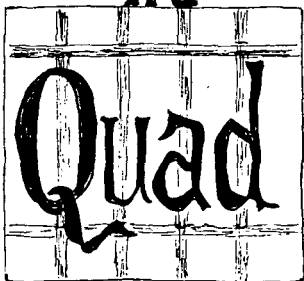
"The real murderer is going scot-free. When Wyle picked up the phone that night and called Arthur Turner, he killed Ron Giampietro as surely as if he'd stuck the knife in him, and there isn't anything we can do to him. Do you realize Benjamin Wyle got away with murder?"



Some birds seem to need the security of their cages.



Colloquies in



Welcome aboard. What's your name?"

"Call me Alec. What's yours?"

"Alec what?"

"Alec Smith. Alec Jones. Alec Brown. White. Black. Gray. I got a wide choice."

"Have you been here before, Alec?"

"Nohow. I make a steady habit of staying out of these places. What are you, man—some kind of jailhouse quiz kid?"

"Not at all. I'm an involuntary guest just like you. The name's

Cornelius Fitzhugh, but don't call me Connie or anything like that. Fitz is all right."

"Fitz it is, then. Is the upper bunk yours, Fitz?"

"Well, not by preference. This cell already had an occupant when I arrived here a week ago. Hippie character. Hair growing out of everything, ears and nose included. He slept a hell of a lot. Probably full of skag. Didn't talk much and mumbled at best. The grapevine said the fuzz had caught him with a van full of color television, wide-band radio and quadrasonic stereo. They took him out of here two days ago, probably to be drawn and quartered. Anyway, when I arrived a week ago this cat was pretty well tucked into the lower bunk, so I took the upper. I'm kind of used to it now. Any objections?"

by
Frank Sisk

"No sweat, man. The lower suits me fine."

"You're sure?"

"Sure I'm sure. I can sleep on cracked ice, man."

"Good, Alec. Very good indeed. How long do you expect to be in residence?"

"You mean here?"

"Yes."

"My lawyer's working on that angle."

"So is mine. Whenever he sobers up and thinks of it. What were you nailed for?"

"There you go with questions again, Fitzy."

"Fitz is enough, Alec. Long diminutives repel me."

"You don't say."

"I do say."

"I'll try to remember."

"Thanks. Now, what are you in for, Alec? After all, it's a matter of public record."

"So's my name. And date and place of birth. But I don't give these things out to every jock that comes up and asks."

"Well, that's something else again."

"That's privacy, man, personal privacy."

"You can't have much of that in here, Alec. The monotony gets almost bearable when you trade a few secrets with the guy you share the john with."

"Listen, man, you give off some oddball vibes I can't figure. And you sure don't look like a dude who'd land in the can on any run-a-the-mill bust. You got an upper-brackets way about you and a name that spells it out. Cornelius Fitzhugh. *Cornelius* yet. So whyn't we start all over again, Fitz, and try it from the other corner. What the hell they got a fat cat like *you* behind bars for? Answer me that and maybe we'll go on from there."

"Alimony, nonpayment of."

"No."

"Yes."

"Yeah, I guess that figures. I didn't know they still jugged guys for that."

"They do if you've got a vicious ex-wife and a hard-drinking lawyer."

"You can dump the lawyer, man."

"I'm planning to. Meanwhile I'm going to sit out a couple of hands."

"You owe a bundle?"

"If that's the way you describe ten thousand."

"And you can't put it together?"

"I can put it together twenty times over, Alec. I just won't. I'm stubborn that way. Let the leech wait upon my own convenience. I won't pay a red cent until I'm



good and ready, whenever that is."

"Cool, very cool."

"Now it's your turn. What brought you to this sad little cell?"

"I snatched a purse."

"You don't look the type."

"This purse was more like what they call it an attaché case."

"That sounds better. What were the contents, Alec? Military plans for World War Three?"

"Negotiable securities, about a million's worth."

"Big time. What did you do? Snatch it from a bank messenger?"

"No. From a stockbroker. When you snatch something like this from a bank messenger you got to sort of take the buzzard's arm along with it and his shoulder and backbone too. A bank messenger likes to handcuff a thing like this to his damn wrist and throw the key away. No. This was a Wall Street character, an old kind of stud with gray hair, a good-sized pot and thick glasses. A real push-over. He was walking from one building to another in the same block, carrying this case in his right hand, very nonchalant like. I ripped it off and was already about half across the street before he knew it was missing and then he began to yell something about robbery. I was heading toward a

car parked around the corner with the motor running when I slipped on this banana peel."

"Incredible."

"I got the bruises to prove it. I ought to sue the Sanitation Department. Anyway, I slipped, one hell of a pratfall, man. And I hit my head against the side of a utility pole. This dazed me for maybe all of a minute. Long enough. When I got in focus again a cop built like young King Kong was helping me to my feet. I wasn't holding the case. It must have been knocked out of my hand when I fell. The old stud was holding it again, in both hands this time, and going strong on the subject of grand larceny. My lawyer figures this is my loophole."

"Figures *what* is your loophole, Alec?"

"The fact that nobody actually seen me with this case in my hand. Nobody, that is, but the old stud. And he don't have twenty-twenty vision exactly. By the way, Fitz, I hope you're forgetting all this just as fast as I been telling it. For your own good. Do you get it?"

"See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil."

"That's the safe way."

"Have a cigarette, Alec."

"Don't mind if I do. The pigs give me a receipt for mine and



DEAC

my lighter. They don't trust nobody."

"Out you come, gents. Time for supper."

"What's on the menu tonight, McGee?"

"Well, now, Fitz, I think I heard the chef say something about starting off with champagne and caviar. How zat sound?"

"What kind of caviar?"

"He didn't say."

"You've been gone more than an hour, Alec."

"My mouthpiece is all mouth, Fitz. But he did slip me some cigarettes."

"Did he slip you any good

news to accompany the weed?"

"In a way."

"You're going to make bail."

"Maybe in a couple a days. We're waiting for a hardnose in the D.A.'s office to take a vacation. He's due off in a couple a more days."

"You know, Alec, I always understood a guy with your connections never languished in quad more than twelve hours. Twenty-four at most. In and out. Fast. Like an eel in a lobster trap."

"What do you mean, my connections?"

"Well, I heard you've got good ones, with special influence in certain quarters."

"You better spell it out a little, Fitzy."

"Please, Alec. Not Fitzy."

"Spell it out, Fitz."

"It's been coming in over the grapevine since you took up residence."

"Yeah?"

"You're described as an arm of organized crime, Alec—a strong arm."

"Anything else?"

"A hit man, they say. A real pro. With the heaviest score east of Saint Louis. Of course a lot of things are grossly exaggerated in a place like this. Gossip twists the facts out of all true proportion. I take it all cum grano salis, Alec."

"Take it and stuff it, man."

"Up and at 'em, gents. Brook trout for breakfast."

"Listen, McGee. When am I going to be able to rent a radio?"

"You're next on the list, Fitz."

"Alec."

"Yeah?"

"I'd like to ask you something in sworn confidentiality."

"Go to it, man."

"Promise you won't be annoyed."

"I'm never annoyed. I'm always cool, Fitz. Haven't you noticed?"

"Cool is the word all right, Alec. Please remain so while I ask

this simple question. In sworn confidentiality. Are you really what the grapevine says you are?"

"What if I am?"

"In that case we might do a little business together."

"What kind of business?"

"Hit-and-run."

"Hit who and run where? In this joint I don't have much leeway, man. None, in fact. Ain't you kinda noticed that?"

"I'm talking about when you get out, Alec."

"I'm listening."

"It concerns my—"

"Here comes McGee."

"Afternoon, gents. How'd you like a stroll in the yard? Nice sunny day outside."

"I accept, McGee, without equivocation."

"I thought you would, Fitz. And I really wish I could fix it for you. Don't look so disappointed. I do have some good news. That radio. You'll get it tomorrow. One of your neighbors is moving up to the big house."

"Hey, Alec. Are you asleep?"

"No."

"About that talk we started to have this afternoon."

"What about it?"

"Do you mind if we continue?"

"If that's what turns you on,

man, you can just be my guest."

"What turns me on—and off too—is my ex-wife. She's a true-blue biddy, Alec. Always was, always will be. Right now she's trying to milk me for a grand a week while she's making out with another man, practically living with him."

"I heard of such things, Fitz. Tough shake."

"I want to do something about it."

"Don't blame you."

"I want her wasted. I believe that's the word."

"That's one of them. Why?"

"Why? Because alive she's going to cost me a grand a week. That's fifty-two grand a year. It could go on for years and years, Alec. Isn't that reason enough?"

"I guess so. Well, good luck."

"Obviously I can't do the job myself. I'd be number-one suspect before she got cold. The cops would have me under the hot lights in no time."

"Good thinking, Fitz."

"However, if Eva were wasted while I was still under lock-and-key, the coast would be clear. Is that still good thinking, Alec?"

"It's good."

"So how about it?"

"Is this a contract offer, man?"

"That's right."

"It takes a stack of bread, man.

You got any idea how much?"

"Not really."

"Maybe even more than a guy with a name like yours can stack. Cornelius Alimony Fitzhugh. Take a guess."

"I wouldn't dare."

"How's thirty K strike you?"

"Thirty K?"

"Or like you say, grand."

"Thirty grand. It sounds reasonable. Is it a deal?"

"It might be. If you got that kind of greenery stashed here in the mattress."

"I'm really serious about this, Alec."

"I'll get serious too, man. As soon as I see the bread."

"You know I haven't got it on me."

"I know."

"It's all in safe-deposit boxes where Eva and her lawyer can't get their greedy mitts on it. Before I cut off the alimony payments I gradually liquefied my assets and then buried them deep where only I can dig them up. But dig them up I will as soon as Eva's off my back. Yes, Alec, I'll take you to my nearest cache and joyfully pay into your hand a secret thirty grand or, if you prefer, thirty K. You have my word on it as a gentleman and a cellmate."

"Crazy."

"What's so crazy about it?"

"In my line we don't deal in IOU's, Fitz. Cash *before* delivery. That's the policy."

"The policy shall have to be altered in this case."

"Yeah? What makes you think so?"

"Well, let's face the facts. I can't get the cash without leaving here. I can't leave here unless I pay a three-month arrears in alimony. That amounts to more than twelve thousand bucks. But if I should petition the court and pay up and get out, my freedom itself would make me a prime suspect in the event of my ex-wife's murder. Ergo, it is essential to the plan that I be certifiably in du-rance when Eva's life is snuffed out. So?"

"So what?"

"Will you take the contract, Alec?"

"Not a chance, man."

"Would you consider it if I sweeten it up a little?"

"Not a chance."

"What if I add to the thirty thousand the twelve I'd save on back alimony? That's forty-two big ones, Alec. A man can go places with forty-two."

"You're spinning your wheels, Fitz."

"You mean you don't trust me?"

"I trust in God. All others pay

cash. That's a piece of my code."

"Is that your last word?"

"You catch' on."

"Good morning, Fitz."

"Good morning, McGee. Is that a radio under your arm?"

"Nothing else but."

"Eureka!"

"No, it's a Japanese make."

"I thank you, McGee. Just charge the rental to my commissary account."

"Don't worry."

"You're not smiling, Alec. Does that mean the great mouthpiece brought negative news?"

"I'm making bail. I'll be sprung in an hour."

"Then why the long face?"

"The party putting up the bail also gives me the word to jump it."

"Is that so bad in your line of work, Alec?"

"It definitely ain't good, man. It means somebody don't trust me in front of the grand jury."

"So they want you to make yourself scarce."

"That's about it. Which means I need running money, Fitz. A big pocketful of bread."

"Won't your patron supply you with that?"

"The word I get is they're writing off the bail bond and that's

all. I'm on my own. It's your lucky day, Fitz."

"Oh?"

"That contract you want to let."

"Oh yes."

"I got ten days before the grand jury wants me. Time to handle a contract. For fifty K."

"Fifty?"

"If it's too rich, forget it."

"It's not the price, Alec. The job's worth every penny of it. But what about your policy of cash before delivery?"

"I'm changing that just this once."

"So you trust me at last."

"Like hell I do. But I need the bread bad. Once I do my part, how long will it take your lawyer to spring you?"

"About five days, I'd guess."

"Five days? Why so long?"

"Well, the court requires certain formalities, as I understand it. To purge myself of contempt I'd have to get my lawyer to present proof of my ex-wife's death, together with a petition of some sort. A good five days, I'd say."

"No more than five days?"

"That should do it."

"Okay. Now today's Tuesday. I'll do the job tomorrow. That's Wednesday. As soon as you get the word, you start your lawyer in motion. That gives him Thursday

and Friday to collect his papers. We got to write off the weekend. Which brings us to Monday. You think you can get loose by then, man?"

"I'll guarantee it."

"And you better believe I'll be watching the damn court dockets like a damn hawk. As soon as you set foot on the street I'll be close to you as your socks and we'll quick-step it to your handiest safe-deposit box."

"Perfect."

"Remember, I got to get my tail outa the country before the grand jury calls. Now tell me all I ought to know about this broad."

"After the sound of the gong we'll be bringing you the eleventh-hour news . . .

"Less than an hour ago sudden death finally caught up with lovely society matron Eva Merritt as she stepped from her car in a parking lot near a beauty salon where she had a standing appointment every Wednesday morning. Police say Mrs. Merritt was shot in the head at close range by a person unknown who probably used a silencer. Nobody heard the shot and no eyewitnesses have come forward as yet. Only two weeks ago this same woman narrowly escaped death when she and her husband, Dr. Peter Wat-

kins Merritt, were taking an after-dinner stroll outside their Fifth Avenue residence. At that time the bullet missed by a fraction of an inch, ripping through the sleeve of the fur coat she was wearing. Both the doctor and his wife saw the assailant as he fled down an alley and tentatively identified him as her first husband, Cornelius Fitzhugh. Police arrested Fitzhugh two hours later at Laurelton Farms on Long Island where he was employed as a trainer of blooded horses. He steadfastly denied making the attempt on the life of his former wife who had won a hotly contested divorce against him three years earlier and had even settled an undisclosed sum of money on him as alimony . . .

"Top of the morning, Fitz."

"Same to you, McGee."

"This is one Thursday you won't forget in a hurry, I bet."

"Why is that?"

"It's the Thursday the D.A. decided to wipe your slate clean. You're as free as a bird, Fitz. Step

right on out of your cage now."

"I don't want to step out of my cage."

"You don't have much choice. The investigation has been dropped. We need the room and a bookie down the block needs the radio. So out with you, Fitz, and I'll take you up to the office where you can collect your valuables."

"I can't leave, McGee. I just can't."

"You'll leave if I have to drag you. Out you go. *Out!*"

"No, no, no. You don't understand, McGee. I've got to stay here eight more days."

"That's not the way I hear it."

"Fitzy."

"Hello, Alec."

"You look a little pale, Fitzy."

"I suppose so."

"But I think we can fix that, Fitzy. We'll take a little spin in the country and get a little fresh air. See that green car near the parking meter?"

"Yes."

"Just walk toward that, Fitzy."



To gain the advantage, one must get the number of an adversary.

Mad Maud, the



My name is Ken Wenks. I am a Canadian journalist who, once having got to London, has made a career of staying here, I like it that much. Over the course of ten years, I have developed an intimate knowledge of the convolutions of Westminster and have used this expertise to guarantee my steady employment by a succession of North American publications, each better than the last. I am reasonably well-paid for my journalistic labors.

As Rob MacKenzie, prolific author of paperback thrillers, however, I have made a bundle and a half, even after the Inland Revenue has taken its cut. I have also made the acquaintance of one of my fans: the beautiful Shelagh O'Keeffe. Ah, Shelagh. Irish, beautiful, semi-aristocratic and the

highly successful proprietress of an antiques shop and interior decorating service in the smartest part of Chelsea.

Shelagh convinced me that I should sink some of my booty into real estate. Houses. Well, to begin with, a house. The initial plan was that I'd buy a house, she, funded by me, would furnish and decorate it, and then I'd sell it at a handsome profit—minus Shelagh's 10%—to somebody like an American millionaire. House not even purchased, I had begun to entertain a second plan: once the house was fixed up, it would be the ideal

place for Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Wenks to set up housekeeping, Shelagh being the Mrs. of the title. Shelagh . . . such red hair! Such green eyes!

Well, it wasn't as easy as that. No, not at all. In hunting for a

evening I plied her with this elixir and she finally agreed, among other things, to let *me* buy the house on my own if I would let *her* decorate the house on her own. A further martini applied, she also agreed to work into her

Harrowgate Hag

house, I kept looking backwards from Georgian while Shelagh kept looking forward from, let me be kind, 1984. A mystifying propensity, I hear you saying, in a girl who makes her living searching out antique furniture and bibelots. The truth is, she has made most of her money out of being the *Modest* decorator around: plastic slate, crocodile fabrics, wet-look wallpaper, all that.

What to do?

Even before I answer, I predict cries of "Male chauvinist pig!" I, however, prefer to think of myself as a student of human foibles. Shelagh's foible is that she is something of a snob. She thinks a martini cocktail mixed with American ingredients, U.S. Air Force PX, is highly superior to a plain old Beefeater's martini. One starry



interior schemes the assorted Queen Anne and earlier and later stuff I had already collected in my tiny service flat.

Free of Shelagh's penchant for floor-to-ceiling glass, I did not find my search for a house an easy task. I quickly ran through the repertoire of one estate agent after another.

"A little fixing, that's all it

needs, truly." That was an old Etonian trying to flog a boathouse on the Thames that had been uninhabited since the Great Fire.

"Trendy, baby, trendy." A sharp-lapelled Cockney showing me a loft in Whitechapel that had most recently been a dress factory (surely Fagan had turned it down as depressing) complete with obscene scrawlings on the wall of the single, stinking, highly primitive loo.

"Of course, the lions crying at night may disturb your sleep," the lady estate agent, probably a near-miss as a lady-in-waiting, said haughtily as she showed me around a Regents Park terrace house, "especially if you have young children. But, after all, they're asking so awfully much for it, it really should be *you* crying, shouldn't it?"

One morning, having got to the stage of utter hopelessness, I spotted the ad in the *Times*. Cracking the code, I discovered that a house in Hampstead, one of my favorite parts of Greater London, had come up for sale as the result of a particularly complicated estate finally having been settled. I smelled a rat, of course, since houses in Hampstead, which has become trendy, baby, trendy, for perhaps the tenth time in the last three hundred years, can eas-

ily be sold by word of mouth rather than by costly ads in the *Times*, but I held my nose and telephoned the private number listed in the ad.

No. 11 Jolly Row.

I wanted it for its rosy brick exterior even before I saw the delights of its interior: a cheerful daylight basement, front-to-back drawing room, front-to-back dining room, numerous spacious bedrooms upstairs; and, at the end of the elegant entry hall, a small room with a view of the garden now overgrown with weeds the size of sequoias. It would make an ideal study for me.

The rat I had smelled soon revealed itself as the price the inheritor was asking. Unnecessarily huge considering the house had been abandoned for ages, though not totally unreasonable.

For a time I played a waiting game, hoping for a reduction in price. I sent round an engineer who marvelled at the construction, the slate roof, the copper plumbing; an architect who offered to do his projections for almost nothing if I'd just let him work on such a gem of a place, and my daily. She said the servants' quarters were so "comfy," she could put together a staff for me in a matter of minutes.

With so many resounding Ayes!

I handed over a check to the rather rabbit-looking estate agent, little time wasted, moved into My House. Shelagh went straight to work on the living and dining rooms and, even though surrounded by tea-swilling workmen who seemed only secondarily interested in ripping up floors and laying down carpets, and even though taken somewhat aback by the Mod stuff Shelagh was strewing around on the first floor, I found myself a happy man.

That agreeable state did not last very long.

Having worked in my sparsely furnished study until nearly midnight one night, I crawled into bed, only to be disturbed immediately by a violent storm which suddenly blew up. The windows rattled so severely it was almost as if the storm were trying to break into the house. At the very height of the gusts I heard a frantic banging on my front door. At first I thought a shutter had come loose, since the house was not in the best of repair, but it soon became obvious that someone was urgently summoning me.

I jumped into my robe and slippers, every Rob MacKenzie plot I had ever concocted flashing through my mind, and hurried down the stairs and went through a great deal of unbolting to open

the front door a crack for a peek.

There was no one there.

The knocking had been so urgent, however, that I ventured out into the middle of the street. But Jolly Row was as quiet and as calm as an unopened tomb.

"Overwork," I said to myself and went back up my front steps. Just as I opened the front door, a blast of wind caught it with such force that I was thrown, virtually headfirst, into the entry hall. Bruised and smarting over my insult by nature, I eventually made my way back to bed. The storm continued unabated and three more times I went downstairs to answer the banging. I at last decided that I was being tormented by the neighborhood drunk, thug or idiot who knew just how far the single occupied bedroom in my house was from the front door, and pulled the covers over my head, falling after a long time into a nervous, unrefreshing sleep.

Having been so harassed, I very naturally overslept the next morning and, since I had an early appointment, dived into my clothes and sped out of the house, not returning until long after the tea I had promised to give to Shelagh over her never-ending supply of sample books.

I let myself in and was immediately confronted with Ireland,

rampant. Shelagh was clearly angry as hell which, even for her, was somewhat an overreaction for a delayed tea.

"Look here," she said, doing a splendid imitation of Glenda Jackson being arch and bitter, "if you don't like the things I'm choosing for the house, just say so, why don't you? There's no need to throw the furniture about and pull the pictures off the walls!"

"What *are* you talking about?"

"Oh, *really!* You know *just* what I'm talking about! Your cleaner took one look at it and says to tell you she's off to South-end for a holiday until further notice! And don't blame it on the workmen. They've walked off in sympathy with the dockers today over containerized shipping!"

"Shelagh?" I tried to catch hold of her.

"Just have a look at *that*, then!" she said, steering me at top speed into the livingroom.

It was a sight to see. The room, as does the dining room, runs from the front to the back of the house and is about forty feet long with French doors opening onto a long balcony overlooking the garden at the back. It was simply littered with overturned furniture, mainly the new stuff Shelagh had bought to mix with the 18th Century furniture I had purchased

and liked so much better. I had no objections to this eclectic style since Shelagh seemed to know what she was doing, but I could not help but silently congratulate the burglars who had concocted this mess.

"And the dining table!" she wailed. I perked up my ears. The dining table was a twenty-foot Parsons table done up in puce Formica. "It's scratched, scratched, scratched! You wicked man!"

I got my hands on Shelagh's softness, getting a couple of scratches myself in the process. "Burglars," I whispered into her ear.

"Fancy that," she snarled, breaking away and tenderly picking up the toppled Francis Bacon reproduction of a peeled, howling nun, "Rob MacKenzie himself being burgled!"

I broke out the American gin from my Adam commode and mixed a pitcher of therapeutic martinis. Over the drinks and a half-tin of stale peanuts, I explained to the gradually mollified Shelagh about the banging the night before.

"You're not making it all up, are you?"

"Darling girl, I need my sleep. Abdington was very shirty when I arrived late this morning and he's



not a source of information I can afford to annoy."

I could see this went down very well with her and was just on the point of suggesting she go downstairs to the kitchen and fix us

some kind of tea when she looked at her watch and exclaimed she had to flee to an after-hours preview of kinetic sculpture at Harrod's. I seemed bound to miss all my meals that day.

Which is why I was up and about that night when the banging started again. I immediately rushed from the kitchen up the stairs to the livingroom, which I had set aright, but it was perfectly undisturbed. So, like a fool, I opened the front door and was almost knocked down by a blast of air from the dry, windless street. Quite on its own, the hair on the back of my neck rose.

The banging was now *inside* my house but, by the time I reached the livingroom, it had stopped. No wonder. All Shelagh's stuff had already been chucked about.

"All right, whoever you are," I shouted, a la Rob MacKenzie, "you might as well come out. I'm armed and a *crack* shot!" I manipulated the chicken leg in my robe pocket menacingly.

There was that damned blast of graveyard air again and I found myself flat on my back on Shelagh's cream-colored wall-to-wall watching the shutters on the open window at the turn of the stairs rattle as the damp wind let itself out.

Had I a ghost?

"A ghost? A *spirit*? Rob, darling, you've been reading too many of your own books."

Shelagh calls me, affectionately and *always*, by my pen name

since she says, and I confess I see her point, that plain old Ken Wenks lacks a certain *cachet*.

"Have you a better explanation? If our furniture-tosser were corporeal, I'd surely have caught him last night."

"Quite a conservative ghost, I'd say," Shelagh mused, trying to restore a chrome and rice-paper balloon lamp to its former glory, but I could see her mind was already elsewhere. I was going to lose this smashing girl if I didn't get rid of my nightly visitor.

"Remember what Larry Olivier did when he was faced with something like this?" The green eyes were reduced to a speculative slit.

"I don't even *know* Sir Larry."

"In the *film*, darling. They *did* show it in the Canadian wild, didn't they? *Hamlet*, Rob."

So she was not indulging in *non sequiturs*, after all.

"With the ghost of his father! Larry, I mean, Prince Hamlet, held up his sword and used it as a cross in case—"

"Yes! Is there a cycle shop roundabouts? We're going to get a packet of that reflecting tape cyclists use to make their cycles ultra-visible at night and we're going to stick a cross made of it outside every door and window in this entire, awful house!"

"What a bright girl you are!" I

said, attempting to bestow a kiss on her.

"Never mind *that*. I'm bloody well fed up with having my furniture bashed about!"

At about midnight, and I can tell you I was very wide-awake, the banging began and it was wilder than I had ever heard. My front door knocker chattered as if possessed. Then, one after another, each window in the house shook until I thought the glass would shatter. There was a terrible crashing in the garden and then in the outside stairwell leading to the kitchen door. I put my head under my pillow, only to remove it a moment later. That was *real* silence I was hearing. Shelagh's scheme had worked!

Far up over my head, I heard a drumbeat on the roof. The house was filled with the sound of a great "Ah-h-h-h" and I knew two things: the bicycle tape had failed and, sometime tomorrow, I would have to face Shelagh over the wreckage in the drawing room.

I didn't mind the livingroom in its, by now, familiar disarray, but I really did resent the long-armed desk lamp in my hitherto-untouched study being twisted into a pretzel knot, never mind what my haunt had done to my books and

papers, now strewn everywhere.

Shelagh pointed out the very large soot-stain on the pale carpet in front of the fireplace and left. Actually, what she said was: "You bloody damned fool, why *didn't* you think to go up onto the roof and attach crosses to all the chimneys your bloody spook's spoiled this fitted carpet beyond, *BEYOND* repair and I hate you here's your bloody ring back and I hope I never see you or your damned house ever again!"

It was time to call in the big guns: the sort of psychologists who look into ghosts.

I found Harry Chisholm, a fellow Canadian who makes his living writing about science, in his local, the Duke of York, and told him a load of rubbish about doing a piece for a Sunday paper on Hampstead ghosts. Could he give me the name of a parapsychologist?

"Ken, they're all nutty! You want somebody sane and reputable. You want, pardon me, the MacKenzies. He's a mathematician and she's an experimental psychologist, both at University College. Here's his number. Call them up. Ghosts are only their *hobby!*"

My only problem was: should I use Wenks or MacKenzie in ringing up my rescuers? I decided on

Wenks, and the MacKenzies made an appointment to visit my house two evenings hence.

He and she turned out to be not Mr. and Mrs. but father and daughter, dazzling daughter. Connie stood five-feet-eight in her highly decorative Mary Quant as she asked me questions off her clipboard. Her father, Angus, was off checking and measuring in the dining room, while the two of us walked up and down the livingroom.

"Cycle tape applied as crosses. Very ingenious," she noted. "Are you religious?"

"No," I said. "My girlfriend thought of it."

"Ah. Is *she* religious and staying here with you?"

"Good heavens, no! She got the idea from a film."

"I see." Her violet eyes gave me the benefit of the doubt.

"You know, *Hamlet*. Where he uses his sword like a crucifix in case the ghost of his father is really an invention of the devil."

"Oh, of course."

"Your eyes are just the color of heather coming to bloom," I said, quite, quite forgetting myself.

"So I've been told," she said, peering into the fireplace my ghost had used as an entry.

I retreated to my study, leaving unplayed my trump card of also

being a MacKenzie—occasionally.

I did as the MacKenzies asked, and they spent two nights holed up with me in my bedroom, listening. On the first night, I placed a board emblazoned with a red Scotchlite cross in each fireplace, facing up toward the chimney opening. We were treated to a frenzy of smashing and crashing, but all out-of-doors. The only casualties were the redwood furniture and the Plexiglas fountain in the garden.

On the second night, I removed the placards from the fireplaces and the MacKenzies heard the full treatment: a night-long ravaging of the first floor.

All Angus had to say was: "Has it ever touched the kitchen or the bedrooms?"

All I could answer was: "No."

"We'll be back in a few days," he said. "In the meantime, can you give us a bit of breakfast? Connie will cook if you don't, but she'll hate it."

"Daddy!" she protested.

Connie laid on a very nice breakfast while Angus discussed with me the possibility of my seeing a psychiatrist in case all the furniture upheaval emanated from conflicts within myself.

"Really, Daddy, I don't know why I put up with your primitive ideas. There's some perfectly logi-

cal explanation here and you needn't carry on trying to make Ken sound as if he's . . ."

I was just admiring how shining brown is Connie's hair and how truly heather violet her eyes are when there was a voice from the doorway of the kitchen. Shelagh.

"I know several terribly reputable psycho-people in Harley Street who deal with *problems* of this sort," she announced, clearly having no time for Connie, the cook-psychologist.

"This wretched thing you've been wanting has turned up, so here it is, use it in good health, and I hope I never see or hear of you again, EVER, Rob MacKenzie!" She turned on her heel and left, having first thrust into my hands a gorgeous old brass warming pan on which she had stuck a red Scotchlite cross. Obviously, she had meant it as a patching-up present, but Connie's presence had put her off altogether. Leaving the MacKenzies to sort out the Rob MacKenzie crack on their own, I raced after Shelagh and was, very shortly, chatting things over with one of her Harley Street psycho-people at an improbable number of guineas per hour. His verdict was I seemed okay to him and that I either *did* have a ghost or else I had been spending too much time listening

in on the House of Lords where everybody, Bedford and Bath excluded, appeared dead for centuries. A second psychiatrist, called in as a consultant, told me to lay off martini cocktails on an empty stomach.

Meanwhile, back in Jolly Row, Connie and her dad seemed in no way to be able to curb or contain my visitor. Once or twice Shelagh came by, but it was clear our relationship had cooled; she made unnecessary mention of the captain in the Horse Guards who had taken to squiring her about. She took away the modern pictures for their own safety, and shook her head sadly over the balloon lamp and the Scandinavian settee which, by now, looked more appropriate to a barrow in the Portobello Road than to the pages of *House and Garden*. I was bloody well fed up because the *Whatever It Was*, let in so the MacKenzies could record it, had taken to ripping the phone out of the wall and to snapping off light bulbs at their bases. I was also, by now, convinced that my ghost must have some kind of history known to a local historian or elderly resident of the neighborhood.

I, therefore, set to work and struck gold, or the promise of it, at the news agent's.

"The only way I know e's still alive is e's ould ousekeeper comes in ere to buy your thrillers. Great fan of yours, e is. Asn't set foot out of e's ouse these last ten years is my best guess, but e's just the man for the task. Must be upwards of ninety years and e's family's lived ereabouts for generations."

The Honorable Decimus Peyton-Lennox was so terribly old and fragile and transparently thin that for a second I thought I had come on a Hampstead ghost operating in the open.

"Haven't been in Jolly Row in years," he gasped. "A charming little street. The brick fronts remind one of what Hampstead must have looked like when Keats lived here, poor chap. A country town dotted with the houses of city fellahs, large establishments built cheap."

"Actually, mine's the only one left in Jolly Row with its original brick. Not painted up or plastered over, you understand. It's been closed up for years; some problems with the estate, I believe."

"Aha!" Mr. Lennox's triumph appeared to overcome his voice. At last it came back: "Aha!" In the interim I had died a thousand deaths.

"You know something about my

house?" I inquired solicitously.

"Jolly Row. Jolly Row. Murders there, a very long time ago. I remember as a mere lad, my grandfather and his chums talking about it once or twice, lowered voices, of course. Something nasty that had happened when they were still young men. Perhaps even, some of their friends carried off in it. Murders. A mass of people killed, all at once. How d'ye suppose it was done? I can't remember. No blood, though. No blood. Poison. It was poison. 'Bout the time of that second war with the Yanks."

All this information, you realize, took the old gentleman just under half an hour to convey, what with him needing to cough or lie down or take tea or sit up. But, in these intervals, my mind was racketing around at a terrific rate, cataloguing possible sources of information: old newspapers, histories, public records. It might take some time but, if my noisome spook didn't keep me up all night every night, I would be more than up to it. I wanted my house back from It.

"I've narrowed it down to two cases," I told the MacKenzies over tea late the next week. "The first happened in the winter of 1801 and had to do with a man shoot-

ing his wife, her lover, and her mother."

"Decided he might as well be hanged for a sheep as a goat," the elder MacKenzie cackled.

"What's the other one, Ken?" Connie had abandoned her clipboard but was still, scientifically or unscientifically, interested.

"My ghost, I'm sure of it. Mad Maud, the Harrowgate Hag. Ever heard of her?"

There was a slight pause as the M's ran over their mental inventory of unearthly creatures.

"No," they replied.

"Maud worked first as a serving girl, then as a cook in several establishments up north in and around Harrowgate, until someone happened to notice that people seemed to die unexpectedly whenever our Maudie prepared the vittles. An old aunt here, a child there, once or twice the master of the house or his wife. Nothing out of the way, unless you counted up the deaths."

"If no one noticed the deaths, why was she called 'mad'?" my brainy Connie asked.

"Because she had the terrifying habit, when crossed in some way, even by a child, of rushing out into the nearest available open space and shrieking her head off while she dashed about. Since she was *very* bad-tempered, she did

this sort of thing often enough to be noticed . . ."

"Your visitor fills that bill of particulars except it doesn't shriek," Angus observed.

"Agreed. At any rate, Maud left Harrowgate under a cloud and turned up as a cook . . ."

"At No. 11 Jolly Row," Connie pronounced.

"Dead right. Maud worked at No. 11 for almost a year without incident. Oh, a footman did die without warning in that year, but that may just have been statistics rather than Maudie operating. The crunch came, however, with the wedding of the eldest daughter at No. 11. She had made rather a good match and her father, one John Wexcombe who had made a fortune off slaves and rum but came of humble origins, was so delighted that he gave each servant in the household, and there were dozens, a present of money. To cut a long story short, Maud didn't get as much as she had expected, there was a row, she did her customary chasing and screaming, this time on the heath, but then she quietly settled down to the massive preparations for the wedding supper. Rumor has it the master had promised her a more generous settlement at some later, unspecified time. Maud had to feed, you see, somewhere between

sixty and seventy-five people, accounts differ as to the exact number, and the sole survivor, a serving girl of fourteen, could hardly be expected to stand around counting bodies, now could she?"

Connie's eyes were very wide. "Ken, you're saying she killed off the lot? All those people? How on earth . . ."

"She fiddled with the punch, didn't she?" Angus was clearly enjoying the hunt. "Even the children at an affair like that would be given a taste of the punch. Am I right?"

"Indeed you are. The punch was intended for the wedding toasts so the master, in another burst of generosity, sent a batch of the stuff downstairs to the staff. The toasts weren't even finished before people, above and belowstairs, began to drop like flies. When all was silent, Maudie came up to the party, which filled both rooms of the first floor, to view her handiwork. It appears she was so overcome by the incredible success of her revenge against the double-crossing Wexcombe that she took an impromptu slug of the fatal punch herself, realizing her blunder too late, of course. The little girl saw it all from behind the curtain where she had hidden when people began to gasp and fall dead. No one could get her to

· speak for days, not surprising under the circumstances. When she did, though, she said Maud had shouted: "Where's me money, y'devil Wexcombe, where's me money?" before she died, and the penny press of the day really went to town, even to exposing Maudie's career in Harrowgate. Thank God they did or I'd still be in the dark."

"It may sound old-fashioned to you, Ken," Angus said, "but I'd call in the local High Church parson for an exorcism rite. It seems to work when the visitor's been named."

"In this case, old man, I don't think it *would* work. You see, I quite by accident picked up another piece of information in my investigations which, for the present, I intend to keep to myself. Maud's the one who needs to know it. And I shall tell it to her when she arrives tonight."

Arrive she did, at the stroke of midnight. The banging on the knocker began, then stopped straightaway (I had left the front door ajar), and there was the usual tumult of flying furniture downstairs. I lay in my bed upstairs, having fortified myself with a stiff shot of Scotch, frightened enough at the audacities I had planned to have second thoughts. There was

only one thing to do, though, if I was ever to have peace.

"Hey! Ho! Maud! Maudie! Where are you, you great old fool? What's the matter, cat got your tongue? I haven't yet heard one of your famous shrieks, you old monstrosity! Let me have a look at you, you faking terror . . ." I don't know if you have ever tried to shout insults at the tops of your lungs while your larynx is constricting out of sheer fright, but I can tell you it is a painful business. Especially when you discover your efforts have worked and there is a mass of screaming air roaring up the staircase toward your bedroom like a Boeing 747 gone berserk.

She, it (I don't know what to call something that has no discernible shape) zoomed into my room through the door, left ajar as downstairs, and immediately hurled my extension phone and bedlight across the room. There wasn't anything else in the room, entirely Queen Anne, she seemed inclined to pulverize and, since I had taken the precaution of unplugging the phone, no real damage was done there, either. She caromed off the walls a couple of times, then shot out of the room and I could hear her banging around in the other bedrooms, all unfurnished. When I finally got

my voice going again by the expedient of having a long draw on the Scotch bottle I had thoughtfully put in my bed with me, I yelled to her:

"The trouble with you, Maudie dear, is you believe everything you read. You hear *that*?" (She was having some fun smashing windows downstairs at this point.) "Did you hear what I said, or are you deaf as well as dumb . . ."

The door of my room flew wide open with a resounding crash.

" . . . the trouble with you," I continued squeakily, "is that you believe everything you read. You really believe you're smashing up the house of that John Wexcombe, don't you? That it's his wretched strange furniture, bought with the slave and rum money he should have given to you, you're breaking to bits. Well, you *are* an enormous, bloody fool!"

While I was saying this, she/it was slowly, then a bit more rapidly, then quite rapidly indeed, lifting up and abruptly dropping the foot of my bed. In fear of being shaken to death, I shouted out my bit of information: "They've changed the house numberings on Jolly Row twice over! *This* house isn't your No. 11. *This* house was your No. 6. *Your* No. 11 is now No. 19! Got it? You're haunting the wrong house, you

bleeding idiot! You numskull!"

There was a sudden pause in her bouncing of me and my bed. I had got her attention. Rather uncomfortable for me, I must add, since she was holding the foot of my bed at a 45-degree angle from the floor.

"The big white house on the corner, that was John Wexcombe's! It's been painted over, that's all. It's the same house, right down to the Indian-head brass knocker on the front door. Only they've changed the *number*!"

She let down the foot of the bed with such a terrific thump I thought I was a goner, especially when, instantly, all the slats let go, tumbling me, exposed and vulnerable, out onto the floor. The room became a whirling cyclone of boards and pillows, bits and pieces of my phone and lamp and, something new for Maud, entire hulks of my antique furniture. From the corner where I eventually landed, half-crushed but kept out of sight by my former bed's headboard, I watched fascinated as my mattress flew about like a magic carpet, as my highboy did a little jig on its slender legs.

Then Maudie was gone, with the thunder of an express train, down the stairs and out the front door. At the very moment *that*

great door banged shut behind her, every other door in the entire house also slammed resoundingly and I heard the distinct sound of my lovely Early Georgian pier glass smashing on the parquet of the entry hall. A small price to pay, I told myself, to be rid of the Harrowgate Hag, and it was then, I guess, that I passed out.

"Ken, I know you won't tell Daddy what all that babbling you were doing in hospital before you came round meant, but you will tell me, won't you?" Connie handed me a glass of brandy, then poked at the embers of the fire dying in my livingroom fireplace. Done, she came and sat down next to me on my sooty wall-to-wall and I slid an aching arm around her.

"That was a splendid meal you fixed," I said to her. "By this time next week, though, Cook should be installed and we'll be dining off a Hepplewhite table my dear Mrs. Mapes has assured me she can put her hands on immediately, if not sooner. And by tomorrow lunch, the junkman will have carted off that trash," I indicated the splintered remains of Shelagh's furniture heaped in a far corner, "and the carpenter and the glazier will have fixed up the balcony doors and windows in the

dining room"—Maud had tossed the puce Formica straight through the closed French doors and over the balcony—"and then, just about then, I think I shall start being a happy man, now that you've promised to marry me, of course." I nuzzled her glowing cheek. "Mrs. Mapes has *carte blanche* and, since her idea of Radically-Modern is the Royal Pavillion at Brighton . . ."

Connie turned my face toward hers and looked me straight in the eyes. "What *were* you talking about in hospital? I know you know, and I know it has something to do with Maud, the poor mad creature."

Some things I had discovered about Connie early on: she is not only a smashing beauty and a smashing cook, she is also bright and independent. She prefers reading by the fireside to going to smart parties with the same boring, beetle-brained people. Even though I have explained it to her, she hasn't a clue as to who Rob MacKenzie is and couldn't care less. She thinks *I'm* terribly bright. She would get on extremely well working away in a study of her own made over from one of the spare bedrooms upstairs. Last, merely incidentally, I could fill this house with the most horrific junk from the nearest hire-pur-

chase place and she wouldn't give a damn so long as I was included in the setup.

"It sounded as if you were saying 'Bow-wow,'" she prompted.

She deserved to be let in on my secret. In my delirium I had apparently felt pangs of guilt, but not now. "Bauhaus. What I was saying was 'Bauhaus.' You know, that geometric German bunker style of architecture and decoration."

"All angles, no curves. Primary colors."

"Maud was haunting the wrong house. She wanted the big white one down at the corner but the house numbering had been changed so she thought *this* house was the scene of her most spectacular crime. And since this house had been empty for years, there had been no one to disabuse her of her notion."

"And?" Constance is a terribly patient girl.

"The big white house down the way is owned by one Raymond Hatherleigh, London's trendiest hairdresser. Shelagh and I went there once for drinks. An abominable twit. He's left the outside of the house alone, someone before him slapped on the white paint and the old-gold shutters, but he's the one who's gutted the inside, the fool, and he's . . ."

"Turned it into a Bauhaus extravaganza."

"Yes."

"You *are* going to tell him, aren't you? I've grown almost fond of Maud, she did bring us together, but she is frightfully destructive with that wicked temper of hers. I know you think what Dad said is silly but, on her home ground, she may be vulnerable to exorcism."

"I know, I know. But I thought I'd let her have a go at old Raymoan for another couple of weeks before I allow Angus to call in the parson with the bell, book and candle. Hatherleigh deserves Maud. He's really spoiled that house; he's almost as offensive as Maudie must have found Wexcombe, the slaver."

"Maudie herself is very offensive."

"I'm counting on that." I put both aching arms around Connie to show what else I might be counting on.

"Dearest Ken, I regret it but I must go. I've promised Daddy I'd sit up with him tonight in a house

in Swiss Cottage that's been having groans in its pantry and flying objects in its library."

"To keep you, must I woo back Maud? I *had* thought of reminding her that, as a ghost, she was perfectly capable of passing through walls. I had also thought of yelling at her to take a solid shape, except she's so dim she'd probably come back as a wolverine or something even more dangerous."

"Good thinking, Wenks, but suppose you leave the psychology, abnormal and otherwise, to me, and stick to Westminster and whatever else it is you write for all that money. If you start taunting Maud once again, she's liable to come back and frighten our children."

"We're sure to have children," I said, kissing her, then letting her go off to her night's work.

As I went off to bed, I could hear a wind raging down at the corner of the street.

"Cheer-o, Maudie," I said, *very* silently. "If the first one's a girl, we'll name it after you."





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Unhappily, not all unsolicited gifts are returnable.



The man talking to Zhivar was clearly too rich to be walking in this neighborhood. Melina watched them through a gap in the draperies that hung across the front window. She studied the man's tailored suit, his razor-cut gray hair, his healthy, tanned complexion, and she was sure Zhivar could not bring him here.

She was wrong. They were coming this way. Zhivar, in his

contrived Gypsy costume, complete to the single gold earring, was talking rapidly, waving his arms and showing the dazzling white teeth under his moustache. The gray-haired man listened with a half-smile and let himself be steered along the street to the small building that had once been a store. A hand-lettered sign propped out in front read: *Madame Melina—Palmistry*. The sign made no promises so, technically, no laws were broken. The police were tolerant of Gypsies in this section of the city, as long as there were no complaints. Even so, this was the last week Melina and Zhivar could stay in the abandoned store. The entire block was condemned to make way for a high-rise parking structure. Already workmen were pulling down the row of buildings behind them.

As the two men drew near, Me-

by Gary
Brandner

lina let the draperies fall back across the window and walked over to a card table that was set up at the rear of the room. The table was covered with a cloth of crimson silk printed with golden symbols for the sun, the moon, and the planets.

Melina touched a hand to the blue-black hair that hung thick and loose to her shoulders. With proper grooming and makeup she could have been a strikingly beautiful woman. It mattered not to Melina. Zhivar approved of the way she looked, and she had no one else. She seated herself at the table to wait.

"Here we are, sir," Zhivar said, holding the door open for the gray-haired man. "Here is the Gypsy lady who knows all and tells all. Your past and your future are revealed to her by the lines in your palm. Madame Melina."

She lowered her head to acknowledge Zhivar's introduction, then looked up to study the man he had brought with him. He was slightly built, and moved with an easy grace. Melina judged him to be in his middle fifties, a man comfortable with his station in life. He had a good face, with kindness in his eyes.

"Please sit down," she told him.

"Thank you," the man said. "To tell you the truth, I'm a little ner-

vous, coming in here like this."

"There is nothing to fear."

"I'm sure of that." The man smiled. "It's just that I have never had my fortune told before. It happens I had some time to kill before an appointment and your . . . er . . ."

"He is my husband."

"Your husband was very persuasive."

"May I see your hand?"

"Does it matter which hand?"

"The left hand tells your past, the right hand tells your future."

The man smiled at her. "I already know my past, so we might as well have a look at the future." He extended his right hand, palm up, across the table.

Melina pretended to study the man's clean, uncalloused hand.

"I see a business transaction," she said. "It will take place very soon. It involves a considerable amount of money, and you will come out of it very well."

That much was easy. The man mentioned that he had an appointment, and in this part of the city it was not likely to be social. Probably he had business with one of the import firms in the next block. From the man's clothes and his bearing, it was reasonable to assume that his dealings involved considerable amounts of money. As for predicting his success . . .

well, one always predicted success. From this point on Melina would adjust her reading to clues she picked up from the man's reactions and the questions he asked.

Zhivar slipped back past the curtained doorway into their living quarters. His eyes told Melina to squeeze as much as she could out of this one. By leading the man on, she could easily run the bill to over twenty dollars.

Looking up into the man's face, Melina was reluctant to go on with it. No one would really be hurt, of course, but she did not like to deceive people, especially a man with a good face like this one.

Then suddenly she went rigid in her chair. The face of the man began to change. As she watched, the healthy tan paled, and discolored blotches grew on his cheeks. The man leaned back away from Melina, and she saw the skin of his face split into festering strips, then blacken and wither away, leaving the naked, mottled skull.

"What is it?" the man asked. He pulled his hand back, and Melina realized her nails had dug into the flesh. Convulsively she released her grip.

"I can tell you no more," she said, shielding her eyes. "You must go now."



"Are you ill?" the man asked.
"Can I help you?"

"It is nothing. Please go."

The curtain stirred as Zhivar moved behind it, listening.

The man stood up uncertainly. Melina kept her eyes away from his face.

"At least let me pay you," the man said. He pulled a wallet from his inside coat pocket and slipped out a five-dollar bill. He laid the bill on the table and, when Melina still did not look up, walked out of the store.

Zhivar swept the curtain aside and burst into the room. "What's the matter with you, woman? That one was good for plenty if you had played him along right. Why did you let him go?"

Melina continued to stare down into her lap, saying nothing.

Zhivar started to shout something else, then caught himself up. "Wait! You saw it on him, didn't you. You saw the face of death."

She nodded silently.

"And such a rich one he is. Did you see the bills in that wallet?"

"All the money in the world is of no use to him now. He will be a dead man by sundown."

Zhivar's eyes grew crafty. He parted the draperies across the front window and looked out into the street. "There he is. He's going into one of those shops in the

next block." Zhivar moved toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Melina asked.

"After him."

"No, let the man be."

"I will do nothing to hurt him. There is no need. You know better than I that no power on earth can save a man who wears the face of death."

"Then why are you going after him?"

"It is only a little while until sundown. When he falls, someone should be there. You yourself said all that money is no good to him now."

"You would rob the dead?"

"Be silent, woman. I will just follow to see where he falls. That is all."

Melina said nothing more as Zhivar hurried out. It was strange, she thought, that in all the years she had pretended to tell fortunes, before today she had not looked upon the face of death on any of her customers.

She had been a joyful child of four the first time it happened. It was in the old country where Melina and her parents traveled with the other Gypsies, living as they could and enjoying their freedom. Her father, a bear of a man with a rumbling laugh, had been about to leave on a hunting expedition

with two of his friends. He swept the little girl up into his arms for a good-bye hug. She looked into her father's face and began to scream as she saw the features dissolve into a hideous mask of death.

Puzzled, her father had lowered Melina to the ground and tried without success to quiet her hysteria. It was not until long after he had gone that the little girl found her voice and was able to tell her mother what she had seen.

Melina's mother, a woman of dark and wild beauty, had reacted with such horror that Melina began to cry all over again. Her mother silenced the girl and told her she must never, never tell anyone what she had seen in her father's face. Her mother then walked away and sat alone by a blackthorn tree. There she stayed until evening when the two hunting friends of Melina's father returned carrying his body. From that day onward there was no more joy in Melina's life.

She was twelve years old the next time it happened. True to her promise, Melina had never told what she saw the day her father died. Still, the picture was rarely out of her mind. Her mother had become cool and distant with her, as though it were somehow the little girl's fault that

her father had walked in front of the guns.

Melina became a solitary, quiet child, usually playing by herself away from the others. She had but one friend, a girl named Francesca, who had been born with a crooked spine. They would play together silently by the hour, sailing flower boats upon the river. It was the face of Francesca that Melina watched shrivel into a death's head one bright August day. Melina had run screaming into the forest and stayed there until long after dark.

When she returned to the camp she found the Gypsies grouped around something lying on the bank of the river. Melina slipped between the silent people and looked upon the drowned dead face of her friend.

It was to her grandmother that Melina went this time—a tiny woman with skin like dry brown paper. The little girl told the old woman of her awful visions.

"What does it mean, Grandmother?" she had asked.

The old woman sat for a long time before answering. "What you have seen, child, is the face of death. Among our people there is perhaps one in a generation who has the gift . . . or the curse. When you look into the face of one who is to die before sundown

you see . . . what you have seen. It is not your fault, but all the same our people will shun you when they know. They have not the wisdom to separate the prophecy from the guilt."

"What can I do, Grandmother? I don't want to be different from the others."

"I am sorry, child, there is nothing to be done. As long as you live you must see upon those about to die the face of death."

After that Melina's isolation from her people was almost total. The others turned away whenever she came near. Among them, only one scoffed at the fear of death. This was Zhivar, a powerful man in his thirties, with eyes as black as his hair. He began to pay attention to Melina, who was fast becoming a woman. When Zhivar asked her to go with him to America as his bride, Melina quickly accepted.

In the new country they had moved from city to city, living on what Melina earned reading palms, and a rare pay check Zhivar would bring home from some temporary job. Sometimes in a crowd Melina would see the terrible metamorphosis in the face of a stranger. When it happened she would look away quickly and pretend she hadn't seen. She and Zhivar had no friends, so for many

years she had not looked closely upon the face of death. Until today.

Now, as the first light of dawn paled the window over their bed, Melina lay awake and alone. The back door creaked softly, and her body tensed under the blanket.

"Zhivar?"

"Yes. Be quiet."

"What has happened?"

"Be silent, woman. I must have our money."

Melina sat up in bed and clutched the blanket to her breast. Zhivar was a dark silhouette in the gloom.

"You are in trouble," she said.

"I am not to blame. I spoke to the man when he came out of the importer's shop. For some reason he became afraid and struck out at me. I pushed him and he fell."

"The man is dead," Melina said.

"Yes. And worse, I was seen when I pushed him. All night I have hidden, but soon they will be here looking for me. And I didn't even get his wallet."

Melina slid out of the bed and pulled on a loose-fitting dress. Zhivar was on his hands and knees. He ran his hand across the floor in the near-darkness until he found the loose board for which he was looking. He pried this up and withdrew a thin packet of bills wrapped in plastic. He rose, tuck-

ing the money inside his shirt, and pushed past the curtain into the front of the store. With one hand he pushed the draperies aside and looked out.

As Melina watched, the rays of the rising sun probed through the gap and fell across her husband's face.

He said in a harsh whisper, "They're coming already, up the street." He closed the draperies and hurried through the curtain back to the rear door. "I'll hide in the old building across the alley until they're gone."

Zhivar hesitated in the doorway, and Melina knew he was waiting for her to kiss him. Instead, she turned away, holding her body under tight control.

"When I can I'll come back for you," Zhivar said, and he was gone.

In a very few minutes there was a knock at the front door. With a last look behind her, Melina walked up and opened the door to two uniformed policemen. One was about thirty with eyes that were much older. The other was very young with a new moustache that he kept touching unconsciously.

"My name is McCall," said the older policeman, "and this is Officer Flynn." He consulted his notebook. "Is there a man named Zhi-

var living here? You know him?"

"That is my husband," Melina said.

"Is he here now?"

"No."

"Do you mind if we look around?"

"As you wish." Melina stepped aside to make way for them.

Officer McCall walked back to search the living quarters while young Flynn looked around the front.

"Do you tell fortunes, ma'am?" the young policeman asked.

"I read palms. The city has an ordinance against fortune-telling."

Flynn gave her an embarrassed smile. "I wasn't even thinking about that. I was just interested. My wife brought home a set of tarot cards last week, but I can't make heads or tails out of them. Neither can my wife, really, but she plays at it."

"The tarot is difficult to master."

"I'll bet it is."

McCall stepped back through the curtain that hung between the rooms. "Nobody back there."

"Not up here either," Flynn said.

McCall licked a stub of pencil and poised it over his notebook. "When was the last time you saw your husband?"

"It does not matter. You will

never take him," Melina said.

"All we want to do is ask him some questions."

"You will never take him," Melina repeated. She knew it was true because in that one flash of sunlight when Zhivar had parted the draperies she had seen the deadly transformation of his face.

McCall looked exasperated. "Lady, I'd advise you to cooperate—"

The crash of falling masonry out behind the store broke off McCall's sentence. There was a scream of pain, another crash, then silence. The policemen looked quickly at each other and ran out the back door.

Melina eased into the chair by the card table and folded her hands in front of her. She was still sitting like that when the ambulance drove away with Zhivar's broken body.

Officer McCall asked the necessary questions and took the necessary notes. His young partner stood uncomfortably in the background. Melina remained in her chair with her hands folded as the

two policemen walked out the door.

After a minute Officer Flynn came back.

"Ma'am, I just wanted to tell you I'm sorry about your husband. I've only been married a little while, and I can imagine how it must feel to lose someone close."

For the first time Melina's composure broke. She dropped her head onto her hands and sobbed. "Go! Just go away!"

Officer Flynn stood for a moment in the doorway until his partner came pounding up the sidewalk behind him.

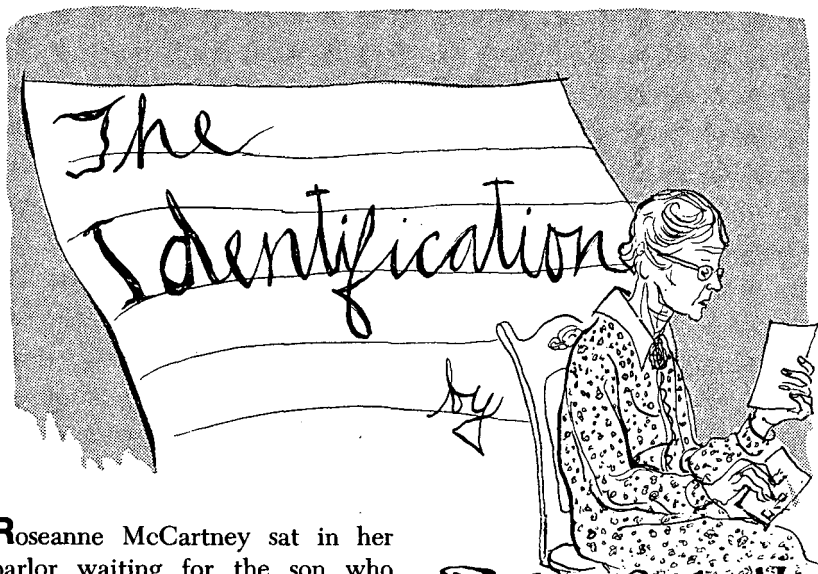
"Come on, Dennis, move it! We just got a squeal on an armed robbery in progress."

The young man made a gesture as though he wanted to say something more, but when Melina didn't raise her head he wheeled and ran with McCall toward their patrol car.

After a while Melina pulled herself erect. Her dark eyes shone with tears. *If only you had not come back*, she thought. *You are so very young to die*, Officer Flynn.



There are occasions, of course, when one who will not see nor hear could be suspected of expediency.



Pauline C. Smith

Roseanne McCartney sat in her parlor waiting for the son who was soon to arrive; her only son, returning home.

The letter lay at her elbow to prove it, open on the table, a penciled scrawl, jaggedly following the lines of tablet paper. *Dear Ma: I am comeing home. have the fatted goose ready. Long time. No see. Ben.* She refused to analyze its brevity, to dwell upon its misspelling and scriptural error. This was her son who had written, at last.

Bennett was his name, Roseanne McCartney's maiden name; good, solid, the name of a family who took care of its own, who held up its head and looked the world in the eye. For these hopeful reasons she had named him Bennett; which he had hated and shortened to Ben.

So what was wrong with the

name of Ben? Nothing at all. It had the ring of strength, the sound of character. Now Ben was coming home after all these years. Perhaps her strict severity during his formative childhood was, at last, paying off.

She hadn't wanted to be strict, heaven knows. She adored the boy, worshiped him, wished to lay out a rich and rewarding life under his feet, but because of his father, she had to construct that life along the rigid and closely confined paths of righteousness.

Roseanne McCartney turned from thoughts of Joe McCartney the moment they entered her mind; the delightful drifter, gregarious grifter who entered her life so long ago to charm the shy and not too attractive third-grade teacher into marriage, only to drift and grift again until his violent end, leaving her Bennett who, with stern and watchful care, must be formed into something very unlike his father.

She had made a good home for the boy. To prove the fact, she looked around the parlor with satisfaction; a *good* home, dignified and secure. So it must have seemed to him, for he was coming back to it and to her at last, after fifteen years—a man now, a good man, ready to settle down.

Thinking of Ben, the man, she

rocked in the chair that had rocked Bennett, the child, while her thoughts delicately fingered those unknown fifteen years, picking uneasily at possibilities and probabilities only to flutter anxiously away.

Bennett was coming home. That's all that mattered.

While Roseanne McCartney rocked and waited, she recalled her few good and warming memories, thinking them to be random selections from a pleasant multitude, but which were, instead, isolated incidents memorable because of their rarity. She thought of Bennett at five, reaching up with chubby fingers to wipe away the tears from her cheek, and at ten as he chanted the Thou-shalt-nots with penitent piety after discovery of his several petty thefts. She thought of Ben at fifteen, returned runaway, held close in her arms, needing her, regretful and full of promises, and at seventeen, again wiping away her tears.

Ah yes, she mused, rocking with her memories, he had always been a good boy at heart and now he is a good man at last and on his way home. She wondered if his hair were still light and bright as if tangled with sunlight, and the cleft in his chin still deep and shadowed.

The doorbell rang.

Her hand flew to her heart and the chair halted on the forward tips of the rockers. She struggled to free herself of the chair which seemed to trap her slow-moving muscles.

On her feet, she smoothed her skirt, dampened the palms of her hands with her tongue and brushed back the gray angel wings of her hair. Then she walked, with hurried dignity, to the front door and opened it upon a man and a woman.

"Mrs. McCartney?" asked the man, to which she nodded rather curtly, looking over his shoulder and down the street—looking for her son.

"Mrs. Roseanne McCartney?"

"Yes," she said.

"May we come in?"

In answer, she moved the door from wide open to half closed and stood in the aperture. "I am quite busy," she said politely, "you see, I am expecting company."

"We'll try not to take up too much of your time," suggested the man and, almost reluctantly, held out a leather identification folder as did his woman companion, but Mrs. Roseanne McCartney, the badges blurred and impersonal before her preoccupation, stood her ground and kept silent.

"Mrs. McCartney," spoke the woman, "we are sorry to trouble

you, but there is a man . . ." She hesitated, cleared her throat and started over: "A man was killed last night, and the only identification found on him was a slip of paper with your name and address."

Mrs. McCartney had not heard it all. She was wondering from which direction Ben would appear—and how he would come. Would he be driving? Or on foot from the bus station?

"My name and address?" she asked the woman.

"Well, yes. That was all. A slip of paper with your name and address on it, no other identification."

The clock in the hallway behind her chimed the half-hour. Mrs. McCartney looked back, adjusted her glasses, then didn't bother to ascertain the time after all, for there had been no arrival time in Ben's short letter. "Well, why in the world?" she said to the woman. "My name and address!"

"What we wanted—what we hoped," said the man almost in desperation, "was that you might accompany us to the coroner's office."

"Oh, my goodness, I couldn't possibly." Mrs. McCartney vaguely smiled. "I am having company, you see. My son is coming . . ." She stepped back and

started to close the door. The man gently reached up a hand to hold it open.

"Mrs. McCartney, it won't take long, I promise you," he said, a note of entreaty in his voice, "and I am afraid I must insist."

"But my son," she protested.

"Leave a key," suggested the man. "This will only take minutes. You might even be back before he gets here." He and the woman exchanged quick, anxious glances.

Mrs. McCartney remembered how it used to be—the key under the mat, back when she was a teacher and not always at home when Ben arrived from school, forgetting how often the key remained under the mat while she worried—and refusing to remember all the years between when there had been no key under the mat at all and no reason for one.

She scurried for her pocket-book, and when she returned, both man and woman were waiting in the hall.

"You're sure this won't take long?" she asked them. They assured her it would not take long.

She closed the door, making certain it was securely locked, bent over and placed the key under the mat. The man helped her down the stairs and into the back seat of the sedan, the woman sat next to her while the man drove.

It was during the short trip from Mrs. McCartney's home to the coroner's office that she got it straight at last. This car in which she rode was an unmarked but official car and these two, the man and woman, were officers in civilian clothes. Through the blur of an earlier preoccupation, she remembered the badges held out to her; the names, even the names had become crystal-clear—Lt. Forster who sat by her side, and Lt. Barker at the wheel. Why were they taking her to the coroner's office? She looked sideways at Lt. Forster, whose eyes were staring straight ahead. "You want me to identify this man? This dead man?" she said, bits of earlier conversations coming back to her like icy drops of water through a fog.

"If you can," answered the woman. "He had your name and address in his pocket. We thought you might know him . . ." Her voice trailed off and her eyes met the eyes of the driver in the rear-view mirror.

They were passing the bus station, easing up to a stoplight. Mrs. McCartney looked out the side window and back as they passed, hoping to see a slim figure with sun-tangled hair—*willing* herself to see him—but of course she could not, she told herself, for Ben had not yet arrived in town, or he was

on his way to the house or already there. She indulged herself in a fantasy picture in which she could see him as he turned up the walk toward the porch and, smilingly, she saw him as he leaped the steps and offered an eager code signal with his knuckles against the door—the signal, a drumbeat in her mind, grown out of her imagination, as vivid as the picture of her son eagerly at her door.

The traffic was heavy. She had not been downtown for years and the sound of it, the rush of it caused her to retreat within herself and remember again what it was these officers, this woman and the man, had said to her on the porch of her house. She turned abruptly and asked, "You say the man is dead? You say he was killed? Last night?"

"Yes."

"How was he killed?"

Lt. Forster's eyes met the eyes of Lt. Barker in the rear-view mirror before she answered. "A gunshot wound," she said.

Mrs. McCartney leaned forward to look blindly out the window at her own mental image of Ben on the porch, rapping out his rhythm of greeting—would he remember the key under the mat? Such an impatient boy, so restless, always eluding her thumb . . . She

turned toward Lt. Forster. "Look," she said breathlessly, "I should be home. My son, you see, he might be there, and he might not wait."

"We're here now, Mrs. McCartney," Lt. Forster said, and Mrs. McCartney shrank against the seat as Lt. Barker parked between slanted white lines clearly designated "Official Cars Only."

She allowed herself to be helped from the car and led into the building. She stared at, without seeing, and listened to, without hearing, the man at the desk; and between the man and the woman who had interrupted her day of great expectation, she walked, without thought, into the next room.

The silence was heavy as they raised the covering and her in-drawn breath, as she looked down at the face, was light as a gently closed door. The hair was not tangled with sunshine as she remembered it, but shadowed with years and now with death . . . Her voice was soft as she asked, more of the body than of the two detectives, "A gunshot wound? How did it happen? Why was he shot?"

Lt. Forster cleared her throat. Lt. Barker answered with hesitation, "He was caught while robbing a jewelry store. Do you know him, Mrs. McCartney? Can

you identify him for us?" he asked.

"No," she said quite clearly, as she looked down upon the shadowed hair and the shadowed beard that, in no way, revealed a shadowed cleft in the chin.

"Are you quite sure, Mrs. McCartney?" persisted Lt. Barker. "Are you absolutely certain you don't know this man?"

She turned away. "I never saw him before in my life."

Back at the desk, they showed her the slip of tablet paper found in the pocket of the dead man, and Mrs. McCartney looked at the jagged writing briefly. "I haven't the slightest idea how he got my name and address," she announced. "Maybe he found it somewhere. Maybe he robbed my son," and she nodded with resolution. "Perhaps so. No one would have my name and address—no one but my son. So this man picked it up—or stole it."

"But, Mrs. McCartney . . ."

She started for the door, then she turned. "What will happen to him? I mean now . . . about the

burial . . ." she said hesitantly.

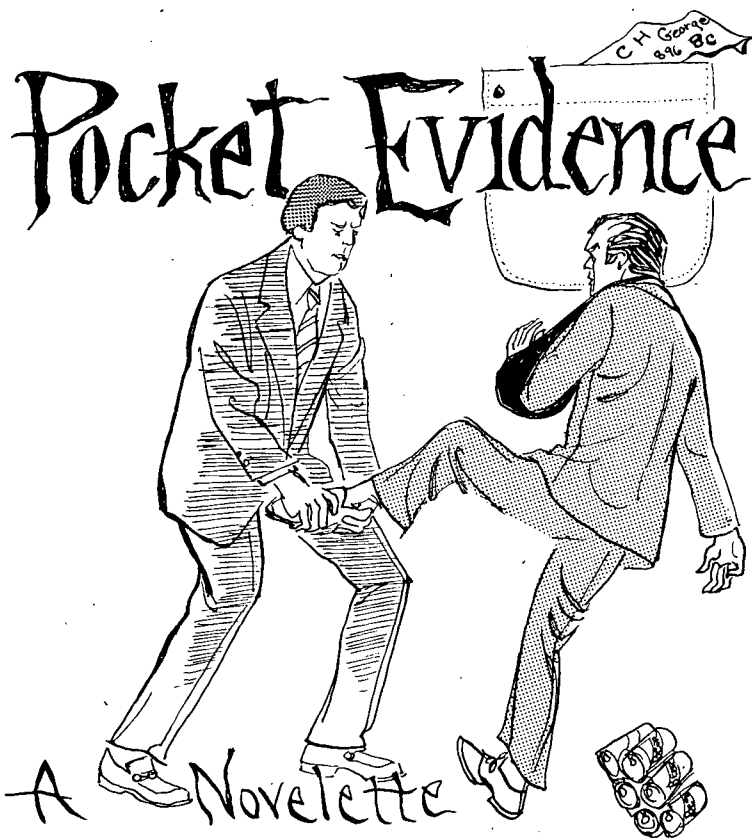
"If we can't get an identification," Lt. Barker said, "we'll try, of course, but if no one identifies him and if we can't find out who he is or where he came from—then, well, then the county will have to bury him."

"Oh, no," she gasped. "Oh, no," and quickly she returned to the desk, opened her pocketbook and took from it several bills, all that she had. She unsnapped her coin purse and emptied the coins. "For his funeral," she said, refusing to listen to their protests, their arguments, refusing to wait for a receipt, refusing to listen. "I am in a great hurry," she said, now impatiently. "I must get home to my son."

Roseanne McCartney then hurried out the door and into the car, eager to leave this building, the body and the telltale slip of paper; eager to return to her home with the key under the mat and the rocking chair in the parlor and the letter from her son on the table.



Many a fowl is ambushed via a concealed blind.



There is a cynical little caveat which says: If you can't stand the time, don't commit the crime.

U.S. District Judge Edward Marcus Bolt failed to heed this in-

by
Harold Q. Masur

junction. He had committed a crime and when he was found out, the prospect of serving time in a federal penitentiary unhinged him completely. Tossed off the bench, disbarred, disgraced, disavowed by his colleagues, ego mutilated, deprived of his sumptuous young bride, all this was more than he could stomach—so the judge put the muzzle of a gun against his temple and squeezed one off.

It ended the judge's problems, but created some new ones for his widow, Laura Bolt. Tall, blonde, with innocent blue eyes and teeth perfectly capped for her career as a fashion model, she suspended her work when she married the judge but resumed it after his death. Now she sat alongside my desk, pale, apprehensive, tremulous.

"The man wants his money back," she told me.

"What money?"

"The money he claims he gave my husband."

"The fifty thousand dollar bribe?"

"I guess so. He called me on the telephone and said he'd paid Edward fifty thousand dollars to perform certain services and Edward failed to deliver." She gave me a look of forlorn appeal. "I came to you, Mr. Jordan, because you were Edward's lawyer and

you were very helpful after his—er—accident."

I let the euphemism pass. I had indeed been Judge Bolt's lawyer—for maybe like about thirty minutes. At the time he retained me, he'd been presiding over the trial of Ira Madden, president of Amalgamated Mechanics. Madden was charged by the government with embezzling one million dollars from the union treasury and although the indictment failed to state as much, they suspected he had squirreled it away under a numbered account in a Swiss bank.

Then, while still presenting its case, the Justice Department started an investigation of rumors that one of Madden's lackeys, a man named Floyd Oster, had reached the judge with a fifty thousand dollar bribe—and that exact sum was found taped under a fender of his Honor's car and identified by serial numbers as a recent withdrawal from one of Madden's accounts. In a panic, the judge got through to me with an SOS, summoning me to his home, but he must have been very close to the brink because he surrendered to impulse before I got there and finished himself off.

It resulted in a mistrial. Now the government was preparing to bring Ira Madden back into court

again. Floyd Oster, the bagman, was himself under indictment for bribery. There had been sundry other complications which I managed to straighten out for the widow. Now, apparently, she needed my help again.

I said, "Tell me exactly what happened, Mrs. Bolt."

She swallowed and drew a breath. "I got the call late last night. A man phoned and said, 'Listen to me, lady. I'm only going to say this once. We paid the judge fifty grand. He promised to help us on something, but he chickened out and shelved himself before he could deliver. We want our money back. Do you read me, Mrs. Bolt? Fifty grand. Have the cash ready day after tomorrow and we'll be in touch. Just stay away from the law or you'll wish you'd never been born.'"

"Bluster," I said. "Empty threats."

"No." Her voice rose on a hysterical note and she leaned forward, gripping the edge of my desk. "Something terrible happened on my way here to see you. I left my apartment and when I stepped off the curb to cross the street, a car suddenly started and came racing straight at me. I thought, this is it! They know I called you and they're punishing me. I'm going to be killed or

maimed. I was paralyzed. I couldn't move. And then, at the very last instant, the car swerved and roared past me." Recollection drained her face, leaving it bone-white.

"Could you identify the driver?"

"I don't know; it happened so fast."

I brought her a newspaper clipping from one of my files. "Look at this picture. Does it resemble the man you saw?"

She studied it, brow crimped. "I—I'm not sure. Is it that man Floyd Oster?"

"The same. From what I know of this particular insect, he's our most logical target."

"Doesn't he know I haven't got the money, that the police are holding it as evidence?"

"He couldn't care less. He knows you have the judge's insurance."

She was on the verge of tears. "But they're not entitled to that. It's my only security."

She seemed unaware of her assets. With that superbly extravagant figure, she had all the security she would need for a long time to come. "Relax, Mrs. Bolt," I said. "It's in my hands now."

She managed a weak smile. "Would you need a retainer?"

I never refuse payment. She

seemed eager to write a check, as though the transfer of money would guarantee success. After she left, I sat back and gave it some thought.

Floyd Oster, presently under indictment, was out on bail. His defense attorney, Edward Colson, was general counsel for Amalgamated Mechanics. Ordinarily, a man like Oster would never be able to afford the ticket for such high-priced legal talent. I could make a fair assumption that the union, under pressure from Ira Madden, was paying Colson's fee.

Coincidentally, Colson's office was three floors above my own, here at Rockefeller Center. I dialed his number and was told that he was at an arbitration hearing and would not be available until tomorrow. I saw no impropriety in bypassing Colson for a direct approach to Oster himself. Undoubtedly, Oster had instructions to keep his mouth zippered, but I was not interested in any dialogue with the man. I just wanted him to listen; admittedly, a quixotic approach.

The building was a converted brownstone, indistinguishable from its neighbors on Manhattan's west side. When I rang the bell, he called out guardedly for identification. Then he opened the door

as far as the protective chain would allow. Floyd Oster, a carp-faced and sulfurous little brute, with a smile like a curved scimitar and just as lethal, was Ira Madden's right hand. He remembered me without pleasure from our last meeting.

"May I come in, Floyd?"

"No."

"I have something I want to say."

"Say it to my lawyer."

"If Ed Colson knew what you're up to, he'd walk away and you'd need a new attorney."

"Ed Colson works for the union. He does what he's told."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Say your piece and bug off."

"You never learn, do you, Floyd? Right now you're in a sling with the U.S. Attorney on a bribery charge. But that isn't enough. You're chasing after more grief, adding a count of extortion to your indictment. I'm telling you to stay away from Laura Bolt. One more threatening telephone call, another attempt at intimidation like that automobile caper this morning, and I promise you I'll blow the lid."

"You're talking Greek."

"That's a bad hand, Floyd. Throw it in. You know exactly what I mean. And I don't think you're acting on instructions from

Ira Madden. With what he has stashed away, fifty grand would be peanuts. So this is your own private little operation. I'm telling you to drop it. Get off the lady's back. Because if anything happens to Mrs. Bolt, the roof will fall in."

It bothered him a lot. He called me a name and slammed the door.

So maybe he needed money. Maybe his common sense was canceled by greed. Whatever, the judge's widow was back on the phone late the next morning, agitated and close to panic. She'd had another call. The banks would be closed over the weekend, so Monday was her deadline, the voice asking her how she would like to attend my funeral just before her own, and reminding her of the automobile that almost sent her flying through the air like a rag doll.

I calmed her, broke the connection, marched out to the elevator, and rode it up three floors to Edward Colson's office. Oster's lawyer would have to read the riot act to him. Colson's secretary told me that he would be leaving for lunch in a few minutes, and without an appointment . . .

"Just tell him that Scott Jordan is here."

She looked doubtful, but spoke into her phone. In ten seconds Colson emerged, a tall, shambling

pipe-smoking man with blunt features and a shock of brown hair. Edward Colson was a courtroom orator of the old school, somewhat flamboyant but tough, shrewd and knowledgeable.

"Counselor," he said, voice resonant, both hands employed for the shake, "you promised to call me for lunch one day. Must have been a year ago at least. Come in." He took my elbow and steered me into his private office.

He had company—a spinster-type, thin and flat, early thirties, with mousy hair and soft spaniel eyes that seemed to spend most of their time worshipping at Colson's shrine.

He introduced us. "My fiancée, Lily Madden."

"Ira Madden's daughter?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "Do you know my father?"

"Not personally."

"Lily and I became engaged last week," Colson said.

She raised a hand, proudly displaying a blue-white rock about five carats in size. It caught the midday light and sparkled. No financial burden on Colson, I thought. Easily affordable, considering the annual retainer he got from Amalgamated Mechanics. Still, Lily Madden was so obviously enamored she probably

would have been satisfied with a zircon from the five-and-dime.

From time to time I had seen Colson squiring a few lovelies around town. He was a connoisseur. So why settle for someone as plain as Lily Madden? Insurance, probably; Colson relished the good life, and as Ira Madden's son-in-law, his position as general counsel for the union would be secure.

"Shot of brandy?" he asked.

"No, thanks. Could I talk to you in private for a moment?"

"We have a table reserved for lunch. How long do you need?"

"Ten minutes should do it."

"Lily, please. There are magazines in the reception room."

She smiled at him, eyes lingering on his face, and stepped out.

"Marvelous girl," he said.

"All these years a bachelor, Ed. And now you're taking the plunge?"

"It's time, isn't it? I'm not getting any younger." He settled behind his desk and folded his hands. "What's on your mind, Counselor?"

"One of your clients. Floyd Oster."

He made a face. "I take the good with the bad. As a union official, I have to go to bat for him."

"Naturally. But you must be

soaking the man unmercifully."

"How do you mean?"

"Oster got his neck way out, trying to raise some heavy sugar."

"Impossible. This defense isn't costing Oster dime-one. Amalgamated Mechanics is picking up the tab."

"Then he's involved in a little private enterprise, highly illegal. Or perhaps your future father-in-law is prodding him."

Colson's head snapped up. His smile vanished. "What are you driving at, Jordan? Let's have it."

I recited for him, chapter and verse. "You're Oster's lawyer. You know the background. That fifty grand he gave Judge Bolt—"

"Correction. One adverb short. *Allegedly* gave . . ."

"Do you doubt his guilt?"

"He carries a presumption of innocence."

"An eloquent phrase, Edward. But for Oster, a mere technicality. If Judge Bolt were still alive and testifying, the government would have no problem clapping your boy into the slammer for a couple of years."

"Maybe, maybe not."

"Nevertheless, somebody handed his Honor fifty grand cash money while Ira Madden was on trial for embezzling union funds. It was not a charitable donation. And who else needed favors from

the judge, preferential treatment, a biased charge to the jury? Whatever, Floyd Oster is now trying to get his hands on it."

"What makes you so sure it's Oster?"

"Come off it, Ed. Everything points to the man. And the U.S. Attorney would dearly love to nail him. None of this is likely to help Ira Madden when he goes back into court."

Colson shook his head. "I can't believe Oster would be that stupid."

"If he had anything but a vacuum north of his sinuses he wouldn't be in all this trouble."

"You think he'll listen to me?"

"You're his lawyer."

"Where's my leverage?"

"He knows the value of your services. You can threaten to dump him."

"No, sir. That's exactly what I cannot do. But I'll bend the rules a little. I'll talk to him. Just remember, these union people sometimes ask my advice. They don't always take it."

"Maybe they've learned a lesson. Both Madden and Oster are facing a serious prosecution."

"Madden feels he can beat the rap."

"How? By bribing judges?"

"That was a piece of damned foolishness. I had no part in it."

"So they keep piling it on, adding extra counts to the indictment. On the next round, you're going to have one very careful jurist up there on the bench. Seems your clients are hell-bent on shooting down your record of acquittals."

Colson got to his feet. He walked over to the window and stood looking at me, his jaw set. "All right, Jordan. I'll have a session with Oster. I'll lay it out for him. I give you my solemn pledge that if—"

The buzzer stopped him. He went back to his desk and picked up the phone. "Who? *Who?* Yes, put him on." He listened and I saw him go tense, sudden shock in his face. "Oh, no!" he said in a hushed whisper. "When did it happen? Yes, of course, I'll come right over." He rang off and looked up, his mouth stiff with restraint. "Ira Madden is dead."

I whistled softly. "How did it happen?"

"Car accident. Madden was behind the wheel, heading north on the FDR Drive. Lost control at the Forty-second Street exit and slammed into a concrete abutment. Too damned lazy to attach his seat belt and damned near impaled on the steering wheel."

"Driving alone?"

"No. Floyd Oster was with him."

"Hm. What were his injuries?"

"Broken wrist. Seems he threw his hand up to keep his face out of the windshield." Colson shook his head. "How am I going to break this to Lily? She loved the old tyrant."

What they needed was privacy. He was brooding uncertainly at the door as I walked through it, his face half-past-six on a stopped clock. I thought I knew what ailed him. There always are dissident factions within a union, angling to take over top management. A new team might sweep out all of Ira Madden's old henchmen, including union counsel Edward Colson.

Madden was given a splendid send-off: bronze casket, a cortege of retainers one-eighth of a mile long, and floral offerings more suitable for a wedding. I attended the last rites out of curiosity but derived no pleasure from the proceedings. Funerals are a pagan ritual relished only by morticians and enemies and possibly a few heirs of the deceased.

Lily Madden, chief mourner, sole surviving relative, shoulders stooped, face hidden behind a black veil, was managing to stay upright with the help of Ed Colson's strong right arm. Floyd Oster was not one of the pallbearers.

His left wing, in a cast, was cradled by a sling around his neck, no identifiable expression on the carp face.

In unctuous tones, the presiding cleric chanted a litany of Ira Madden's sterling characteristics and accomplishments that would have astonished the deceased. The words brought convulsive sobs from Lily.

Mourners departed from graveside just before the final planting. I watched Ed Colson hand Lily into a limousine and then drop back for a brief colloquy with Floyd Oster. There was a snarl on Oster's face. Ultimately, Colson threw up his hands in frustration and joined his fiancée. Oster climbed into the following car.

When I got back to my apartment, I phoned Laura Bolt. Her answering service said she had gone away for the weekend. I thought, *why not?* Manhattan is not unalloyed bliss during the furnace summers. I longed for a touch of respite myself. Two days fishing on a quiet mountain lake seemed like a good idea. So I packed essentials and ordered my car.

Then, heading toward the Henry Hudson Parkway, partly on impulse and partly because it was on my way, I decided to stop off

for another crack at Floyd Oster.

I parked in front of the brown-stone and rang his bell. No response. I kept my finger on the button and finally gave up. As I left the building, there he was, sauntering toward me, lugging a six-pack of beer. I blocked his path at the entrance. He fixed me with a cold, reptilian stare.

"Move it, Jordan. Get out of my way."

"Ah, Floyd," I said, "you don't listen. Not to me, not to your own lawyer. Stupid, greedy, bull-headed. Words can't penetrate that skull of yours, so I'll have to try something else."

"Yeah?" A twisted sneer. "Like what?"

"Like putting you behind bars. My personal project, Floyd. I'm going to bring you down. Ira Madden is no longer around to provide protection. Some new boys are going to take over the union. Colson will dump you, too. So you're all alone, Floyd. And if—"

I stopped, clued by a sudden flicker in his eyes, a slight shifting of weight. As the tip of Oster's heavy shoe shot upward, I swiveled, grabbing his ankle, and twisting his leg through a ninety-degree turn. It lifted him off the ground and when I let go, he fell heavily to the pavement, arms

flailing. Oster landed on the poor broken wing and he whinnied like a horse in a burning barn.

I bent contritely to lend him a hand. He pulled away, frothing obscenities. He had the lexicon of a mule skinner.

"Now you just leave that poor injured man alone," a high-pitched voice snapped at me from behind.

She was small and wrinkled, frumpily dressed, with flour-white hair, stern-visaged, brandishing an umbrella. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself, a big man like you? Attacking Mr. Oster, him wounded and helpless." Her lips were so tightly compressed they were invisible. She threatened me with the umbrella. "Get away from him. Shoo! If you don't leave this instant, I'm going to make a citizen's arrest. Felonious assault."

I repressed a smile. This feisty little specimen would barely tip the scale at eighty pounds, and I didn't for a moment doubt that she was ready to put the arm on me and hustle me down to the local precinct.

I looked down at Oster. "Sorry about your wrist, Floyd. It was unavoidable. But from here on, no more dialogue." Then I turned quickly and went to my car and drove off. I stopped thinking about Oster when I crossed the

George Washington Bridge and headed north on Route 17.

It turned out to be a profitable weekend. I caught six medium-sized trout. I skinned, boned, sautéed, and consumed them with vast relish. I went to bed early and got up early and I thought how pleasant it would be to spend one whole month engaged in these wholesome endeavors. On Monday morning, I drove back to the city.

A visitor was waiting for me in the lobby of my apartment building—Detective-Sergeant Wienick, unsmiling, barrel-shaped and balding. "Have a nice weekend, Counselor?" he inquired politely.

"A reception committee from the New York Police Department," I said. "Well, Sergeant, what cooks?"

"What cooks is a drive in a city-owned vehicle. The lieutenant is waiting for you."

He meant Lt. John Nola of Homicide. The lieutenant sat in his office, swarthy, trim, precise, abrupt to the point of discourtesy, probably the best cop on the force. Although I had not been in touch with him recently, he dispensed with all amenities.

"You go away for the weekend, Counselor, how come you don't let your secretary know where you can be reached?"

"And be at the mercy of the telephone? No, sir."

"Maybe there's an emergency."

"Emergencies are for doctors, not lawyers." I lifted an eyebrow. "What's your problem, Lieutenant?"

"We both have a problem. Yours may be more serious than mine. All right, Wienick, let the lady have a look at him."

The sergeant stepped out and returned a moment later, ushering a woman through the door, the little old lady with the umbrella. She stopped short, staring at me. She pointed a quivering finger and announced in a shrill voice, "That's him! That's the man! I saw him attack poor Mr. Oster. I saw him with my own eyes." She fell back a step. "He's dangerous. Don't let him get close to me. He shouldn't be allowed on the street."

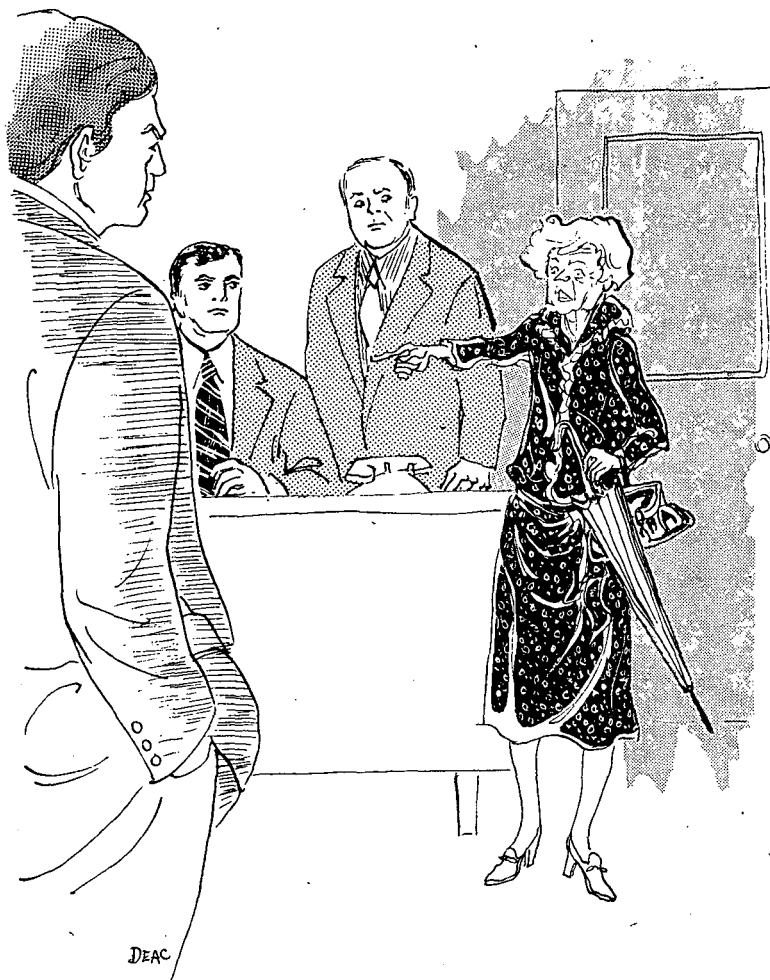
"No doubt in your mind?" Nola asked.

"I have 20-20 vision, Lieutenant. They oughta bring back capital punishment. Prison is too good for—"

Nola cut her off. "See that the lady gets home, Sergeant."

Wienick took her arm and firmly nudged her through the door. Nola sat back and shook his head sadly.

"Don't tell me," I said. "Let me



guess. Something happened to Floyd Oster."

"It did, indeed."

"The works?"

"Enough to put him in cold

storage down at the old morgue."

"I can't say I'm grief-stricken, Lieutenant. Society will survive the loss. When did it happen?"

"Sunday afternoon."

"While I was up in the hills, fishing."

"Proof?"

"If necessary."

"Routine, Counselor. I insist."

"Then you'll have it. Fill me in, please. Who found the body?"

"Mrs. Scrimshaw."

"Who?"

"The old lady. Holly Scrimshaw."

"You're kidding."

"That's her name, Counselor."

A smile flickered, meager and brief. "She thought she heard a shot and went down to investigate. Oster's door was open. He was slumped in a chair, one bullet in his left temple; about 2:00 p.m. Mrs. Scrimshaw ran back to her room and phoned. We caught the squeal and were there in minutes. She told us about that fracas you had with Oster on Friday. She said you got into your car and she remembered the registration."

"Remarkable."

"She is, indeed. We couldn't reach you and figured you were away for the weekend. Enough. Let's bring it home. What happened between you and Oster?"

"It's a long story, Lieutenant."

"I'll make time for it. Talk."

I sighed and sat back and told him about Oster's attempt to extort money from the widow Bolt. He listened, eyes narrowed.

"Would that be the fifty thousand dollars allegedly paid to Judge Bolt for favorable rulings in the Madden embezzlement case?"

"The same."

"You're certain it was Oster?"

"Everything points to him."

"Why you? Why didn't she come to the police?"

"Because he warned her to stay away from the law, and the lady was terrified."

"So you saw Oster on Friday for the last time."

"Yes."

"You couldn't budge him and you decided to use a little muscle."

"You know better, Lieutenant. Violence is not my style. Oster ignored my first visit, and when I asked Ed Colson to intervene, Oster continued intractable. So on Friday I decided to give him one last chance."

"And then?"

"I intended to turn it over to the law."

"You're a big man, Counselor. Are you telling me that Oster tackled you with one arm in a sling?"

"Lieutenant, Floyd Oster was a savage little fiend. If his dropkick had landed I would have been out of business for weeks. Dumping him was purely defensive. He seldom lost an argument. Look what

happened in that accident. It killed Madden and only fractured Oster's wrist."

Nola studied me for a long moment. Finally he reached a decision and said, "The accident did not kill Ira Madden."

I sat erect. "What?"

"Madden was dead when his car hit the abutment. As a DOA, he was taken to the morgue. An attendant found medication in his pocket. Nitroglycerin tablets. You know what they're for?"

"Hardening of the arteries. Generally prescribed for arteriosclerosis."

"Correct. They also found an anticoagulant. Obviously Ira Madden had been a candidate for a heart attack. He was autopsied and the M.E. found a massive clot blocking one of the major heart arteries. The M.E. says it finished him off in the blink of an eyelash and that's why he lost control of the car."

"And Madden kept his condition a secret."

"Naturally. He didn't want his enemies at the union to know."

"Those vials containing his medication, was there a doctor's name on them?"

"A Dr. Lewis Bukantz."

"You questioned him?"

"He was reluctant to talk, but we got enough out of him to clear

the picture. Madden had a history of hypertension, high blood pressure. He suffered his first attack a year ago. He refused hospitalization. Bukantz advised him to ask the government for a delay in bringing him to trial, claiming that stress and anxiety might exacerbate his condition."

I arched an eyebrow. "Exacerbate?"

"Nice word, no? I learned it from the doctor. It means to exaggerate or intensify the disease. Madden turned thumbs down."

"Of course. It would have required a motion by Madden's attorney, stating a reason for the application."

"So the doctor washed his hands of responsibility. What else could he do?"

I shook my head. "Seems the law is a little screwy on this. Cardiac failure is presumably a private matter, not affecting the public. Except they ought to revoke the patient's license to drive a car. Because if a seizure hits the man on a crowded street, he might start mowing down innocent pedestrians."

"You got a point, Counselor. And it's happened in the past." He regarded me narrowly. "How are you on history?"

"Now, there's a staggering non sequitur, if I ever heard one.

What history are you talking about? Modern? Medieval? Ancient?"

"Ancient."

"How far back?"

"896 B.C."

"Nine centuries before the birth of Christ. Not my specialty. I'm a Civil War buff. Why do you ask?"

"Here. Take a look." He handed me a small square of paper with fold creases. "We found this in Oster's wallet."

I saw, written in pencil: #1—896 BC. It rang no bell. It stirred no recollection. I looked up. "Why don't you check with some historian who specializes in the era?"

"I did. Professor Bernard Buchwald at Columbia. He tried to come up with something." Nola made a helpless gesture. "But who kept records in those days? A few hieroglyphics in caves, maybe. Nothing we could use."

"You think the date is significant?"

"Counselor, that paper was in Oster's wallet. The man was murdered. Can we afford to ignore it? All right. Now, let me test you again. Here's another." He produced a second slip of paper. "Also from Oster's wallet. The name of a man. Ever heard of him?"

I studied it intently, like one of

Dr. Hermann Rorschach's inkblots. It read: *C H George*, NAS. No periods between the initials. I dug deep, but the name triggered no response.

"He's a stranger to me," I said.

"I see the handwriting on this slip of paper is different from the other."

"Correct. The date is in Oster's hand; the name was written by Ira Madden. We compared them both with known specimens."

"C. H. George. Have you checked him out?"

"He's not listed in the telephone directory, all five boroughs. Query, Counselor: Do you know of any degree or title or government agency carrying the initials NAS?"

"None I can recall. But the pension fund of Amalgamated Mechanics, the alleged source of Ira Madden's loot, was heavily invested in the stock market. Some of those securities are probably unlisted and traded over the counter. Madden was in charge. So NAS could be an abbreviation for National Association of Security Dealers."

"If C. H. George was in business, wouldn't he list his name in the telephone book?"

"Of course. But which one? Suppose he has an office in Newark or Passaic or Jersey City or

Hoboken or—take it from there.”

Nola looked sour. “Or maybe one of a thousand other cities. Madden would have dealt with any clown who’d kick back a piece of the commissions.”

“Suggestion: Why not call the NASD itself and ask if C. H. George is a member?”

Nola thumped his forehead and quickly reached for the phone and barked an order. As he hung up, the door opened and Wienick was back. “Keep your hat on,” Nola snapped. “Pick up Laura Bolt and bring her in.”

“Now, wait just one little minute,” I said. “Why bother the lady? Can’t you leave her in peace?”

“Your fault, Counselor. You tell me Oster was trying to extort money from Mrs. Bolt. Oster suddenly becomes a corpse, so we have to sweat the lady to find out if she’s clean.”

“Then you’ll do it in my presence. I’m her lawyer.”

“And you’ll advise her not to talk.”

“Come off it, Lieutenant. Mrs. Bolt has nothing to hide. She was out of town when it happened.”

“Convenient. All interested parties manage to leave town while a murder takes place.”

“Not all, Lieutenant. Just Laura Bolt and myself. Somebody appar-

ently stayed here to do the job.”

“Yeah, I know. Or maybe somebody sneaked back long enough to point a gun.”

“Laura Bolt never fired a gun in her life. She couldn’t hit one of the walls from inside a room.”

“You know that for a fact, Counselor?”

I grinned. “No. May I have five minutes with the lady before you put her on the grill?”

“I’d rather not.”

“Lieutenant, the U.S. Supreme Court gives every accused the right to remain silent until he consults with an attorney. You’ve heard of privileged communications. Where’s the privilege if I can’t see her in private?”

“Aagh! Who the hell can argue with a lawyer? You may consult right here in my office.”

“Is it bugged?”

“Do me a favor, Counselor. Kiss—”

“Don’t say it, Lieutenant. It’s not dignified. If—”

The buzzer signaled. He put the phone to his ear and listened, one eyebrow arching. “The man can’t wait? All right, send him in.” He hung up and looked at me. “Stay put. This should be interesting.”

Nola’s visitor was a thin, humorless, balding primate with computer eyes and a razor-slit mouth. He introduced himself in a

flat, uninflected voice and presented credentials: Mr. Harry Prime, Frauds Division, Internal Revenue Service. What he wanted was a line on Floyd Oster. He'd been told that Lieutenant Nola was in charge of the homicide investigation.

"Was Oster due for a tax audit?" Nola asked.

"Nothing like that, Lieutenant. Oster contacted my department several days ago and started preliminary negotiations. He wanted information about an informer's fee."

Nola frowned. "Informer's fee?" "Squealer's reward," I volunteered. "A tip to the gentlemen at IRS about someone's tax evasion and the government rewards the squealer with a percentage of the recovery, if any."

Mr. Harry Prime regarded me with distaste. "I don't believe I caught your name."

"Scott Jordan."

"Yes, I've heard of you. Well, for your information, sir, we prefer not to call it a 'squealer's reward.' 'Informer's fee' would be more appropriate. An individual who assists us in tracking down money that rightfully belongs to the government is a patriot performing his civic duty."

"Mr. Prime, any time Floyd Oster performed a civic duty for pa-

triotic reasons should be declared a national holiday."

Nola spread his hands. "What exactly do you want from me, Mr. Prime?"

"Perhaps I'd better give you a little background, Lieutenant. When Floyd Oster got in touch with us, he said that he had valuable information about a tax evader. He did not identify the man, nor supply any information about where the illegal funds could be found. He did say the sum was considerable, in excess of one million dollars. He wanted to know what percentage of the recovery he could expect. At the conclusion of our talk he made an appointment to see me later this week. Well, you know what happened. Oster was killed, foreclosing further disclosures. The Internal Revenue Service would like to know whether your investigation has turned up anything that might help us."

"Not yet. We haven't been in the picture long enough."

"Can you tell us anything about his associates?"

"The only name that comes to mind is Ira Madden. But there is nothing in the record to indicate that he would double-cross his former employer. May I make a suggestion?"

"Please do."

"Oster was under indictment by the Justice Department. They've been investigating him for months. It seems likely that the U.S. Attorney for this district would have considerably more information about the man than I do."

"He's next on my list." Prime snapped his head around to eye me with sudden recollection. "Scott Jordan . . . Weren't you supposed to represent Judge Bolt on that bribery charge for which Oster was under indictment?"

"That's right."

"Do *you* know anything about this matter?"

"Not at the moment," I said. "But I have a client who's being questioned about the Oster homicide, so I have a special reason for digging around. If I come up with anything involving this tax evasion, would I not be in line for an informer's fee?"

He wore a look of pain. "Each case must stand on its own merits. You are an attorney, sir. An officer of the court."

"Except that I'm not on salary. I'm just a citizen trying to perform a civic duty. I've been shelling out to the government all my life. I wouldn't mind getting some of it back. Strictly legal, of course, according to your own rules. Now, don't con me, Mr. Prime. Will I be entitled to a cut?"

He had to clear an obstruction out of his throat. He spoke with difficulty, as though any payment would be coming out of his own pocket. "Mr. Jordan, if you provide us with information that materially assists the government in making a recovery, yes, you would be entitled to a fee."

"How much?"

"I do not think you would be disappointed."

"Ten percent?"

"In that neighborhood."

Ten percent of one million was a good neighborhood. I said, "Okay. I'll see what I can do."

He produced a card. "Call me at this number." He stood and shook hands with Nola. With me, he skipped the amenities. After he left, Nola gave me a searching look. "I know that expression, Counselor. It troubles me. You're onto something."

"Only a vague notion, Lieutenant. An unleavened theory."

"Maybe I can help."

"Later, maybe. After I work it out."

He nodded in resignation, knowing it would be futile to insist. The door opened and Sgt. Wienick was back again with an outraged Laura Bolt, bitterly complaining. I silenced her with an upraised palm.

"This handsome gentleman," I

said, "is Lt. John Nola. He will allow us to use his office and he assures me the room is not bugged."

Nola stifled a comment and stalked out, tugging Wienick behind him. I asked Laura Bolt many questions and was not especially charmed by any of her answers. She had driven out to Montauk, the weekend guest of friends. They had also invited another guest, male, a bachelor, hopefully suitable as a companion for Laura. A doomed pairing; ten minutes after the introduction she loathed him. Early the next morning, apologizing to her friends, she drove back to the city.

So she was right here in town when Floyd Oster had bought it.

Yes, she'd heard about his death. No, she had not been near his apartment. Her reaction? No trace of grief; in fact, some elation. She had finished the weekend watching television. No calls from anyone.

Nola is going to love this, I realized. With the Anglo-Saxon presumption of innocence, he would need more than coincidence before he could even hold her as a material witness.

Finally I opened the door and beckoned. "She's all yours, Lieutenant."

His attitude during thirty minutes of probing was one of polite

skepticism. In the end, he dismissed us, still dissatisfied. I knew that within the hour he would have a crew on the job, scouring Oster's neighborhood, displaying pictures of the shapely Mrs. Bolt. I put her into a cab.

Theories need a maturation period, time to ripen; so I eschewed taxis and walked, pondering all the way. Destination: main branch of the public library, second floor, a room devoted exclusively to finance and economics. Most of the room's inhabitants were bent over long tables, intently studying stock market reports, seeking that elusive opportunity to corral the easy buck with neither sweat nor toil.

I checked out a fat manual on foreign banks and offshore tax shelters. I dug deep and long, straining my eyesight, flipping pages, and eventually felt a stir of excitement. Something had caught my attention. I ran it down, checking and cross-checking until one logical assumption followed another.

Lt. Nola and I had been hasty and arbitrary in drawing conclusions. We had been dead wrong on two counts: 896 B.C. was not a date; and C H G  rge was not a man.

My initial lead came from Mr. Harry Prime himself, informing us that Floyd Oster had queried In-

ternal Revenue about an informer's fee. Why would Oster do that? Simple. He knew that someone had perpetrated a tax fraud. Who? Who else but Ira Madden, suspected of squirreling away embezzled union funds in Switzerland? Oster had been close to Madden, a loyal lackey; but Madden had died, and there is no profit in being loyal to a corpse. Such niceties would have been alien to Floyd Oster.

Now he was dead, and the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York probably felt no pain. He had enough current cases to keep him occupied well into the next millennium. Consequently, he was not sorry to wipe the slate clean on the indictments of Ira Madden for embezzlement and Floyd Oster for bribing a federal judge, consigning his files to dead storage.

Not so, Lt. John Nola; a homicide had been committed in his bailiwick. Murder is murder, even the liquidation of so rank a specimen as Floyd Oster.

The files also remained open for Mr. Harry Prime of Internal Revenue. So long as he could see any possibility for nourishing the government's exchequer, he intended to hang right in there, proceeding against Madden's estate, if necessary. He'd learned that Ed Colson

had been named in Madden's will as executor.

After leaving the library, I tried a form of mental isometrics, drawing on random fragments of memory, and I now felt that certain conclusions should be passed along to the authorities. Nola was not available, and when I called Harry Prime, he asked me to attend a conference at his office the next morning with Ed Colson and the lieutenant.

The Manhattan District Office of the IRS on Church Street is a building that never failed to make me uncomfortable. Prime sat behind his desk and fixed us each in turn with his vigilant tax-collector's eyes. "A preliminary statement," he said, "just to get the record straight. There are four men in this room. Each of us has a different goal. Lt. Nola wants to catch a murderer. I want the government to collect every penny that's coming to us from Ira Madden's estate. You, Mr. Colson, as Madden's executor, would like to preserve that estate intact. And Mr. Jordan is after a piece of the action."

"Correction," I said. "The money would be a peripheral bonus, welcome but not essential. My chief goal is to clear Laura Bolt of any suspicion of homicide."

Prime was skeptical. "But you would not refuse an informer's fee."

"Would you?"

He looked startled and changed the subject. "Mr. Colson, you were Madden's defense attorney. You were also Floyd Oster's lawyer. Did you know that Floyd Oster had been in touch with my office before he died, informing us that he had information about a tax fraud involving over one million dollars?"

Colson shook his head. "I had no knowledge of that, Mr. Prime. Floyd Oster was into many things of which I was not aware."

"Well, sir, if a tax fraud had indeed been committed, and Oster was aware of it, can you guess the perpetrator's identity?"

"I am a lawyer. I prefer facts to guesses."

"Isn't it a fact that Ira Madden had been charged with embezzling funds from the Amalgamated pension fund?"

"He had been charged, yes. An indictment is not proof. He was a far distance from being convicted."

"Only his death prevented that."

"No, sir. A lack of evidence would have accomplished the same purpose."

"Well, Mr. Colson, we at Inter-

nal Revenue are convinced that Oster was referring to Ira Madden. Would you care to comment?"

"Not especially, Mr. Prime, but I will. Supposing for the sake of argument that Ira Madden had lived, that he'd been tried and convicted, that embezzled money was located, just where would Internal Revenue fit into the picture?"

"Madden failed to pay taxes on that money."

"You're way off base, Mr. Prime. Again, conceding nothing, what taxes are you talking about? That money, if stolen from the pension fund, belongs to the union, and as general counsel for Amalgamated Mechanics, I intend to see that any recovery goes right back into the union treasury. Internal Revenue is not entitled to one red cent."

Prime sat blinking, his jaw slack. Generally, in the presence of tax officials, most citizens are apprehensive, humble, apologetic, so any change in the pattern comes as a jolt. Harry Prime was suddenly at a loss for words, but Lt. Nola had a few.

"As Floyd Oster's attorney, Mr. Colson, you must have spoken to him on numerous occasions."

"In preparation for his bribery trial, yes. I'd like to make one

thing clear, Lieutenant: I think Floyd Oster was a moral leper. Ordinarily I wouldn't permit an insect like Oster through the door of my office. The only reason I took his case was because he was employed by the union and Ira Madden requested it."

"We found a slip of paper on Oster's corpse, bearing the name C. H. George. Did he ever mention anyone by that name to you?"

Colson frowned. "I have no such recollection."

"The name was written in Ira Madden's hand. Did Madden ever mention a C. H. George?"

"No, sir. Who is he?"

"We don't know. It had the letters NAS after it."

"C. H. George is not the name of a man," I said.

Sudden silence; all eyes swiveling and focusing. Nola dipped his chin and said in a very soft voice, "Would you fill that in, if you please, Counselor."

"It's an address in the Bahamas, Lieutenant. Specifically on New Providence Island."

"Keep talking."

"As written, 'C H George' is a form of speedwriting. It means Caribe House, George Street, and the NAS stands for Nassau."

"Who lives there?"

"Nobody. It's the branch office

of a Swiss bank with headquarters in Zurich."

"Now how in hell did you find that out?"

"You remember you also found a number in Floyd Oster's pocket: 896 B.C. At first we thought it was a date. Then, in the light of Mr. Prime's information about Oster's inquiry, it occurred to me that it might refer to a secret numbered account in a Swiss bank. So I checked a source book at the library, and among the banks listed was one with headquarters in Zurich—Banque Credit."

Nola caught it instantly. "Banque Credit. Initials, B.C."

"Precisely. 896 B.C. The number of an account at the Banque Credit. I chased it down and discovered that the bank had a branch office in Caribe House on George Street in Nassau. That tied it. The connection was too obvious to be considered a coincidence."

"And the number one before the 896, where does that fit?"

"It fits the number-one man at Amalgamated Mechanics, Ira Madden."

"And Oster dug it up?"

"You found the evidence in his pocket."

Prime snapped, "Nobody ever mentioned this to me."

"You're hearing it now," I told him. "And it would not surprise me if that account had only recently been transferred from the Zurich headquarters to an offshore branch in the Bahamas to make it more quickly and easily accessible."

"Why didn't Madden close it out altogether?" Prime demanded. "He must have known the government recently negotiated a treaty with Switzerland regarding information about illegal funds."

"My guess is that he was preparing to do that, and would have, if a heart attack hadn't finished him first."

Nola brooded at me. "So Madden was dead. Who else had a motive to kill Oster?"

"Seems to me you were all primed to nominate Laura Bolt."

"That's past history."

"Good. Because she wasn't the only victim. Floyd Oster was also putting the squeeze on someone else."

"Who?"

I pointed. "Our lawyer friend. Mr. Edward Colson."

Colson's chair skidded back and toppled over as he came to his feet. "What the hell are you talking about, Jordan?"

"I'm talking about blackmail. Extortion. Floyd Oster may have been an insect, but his brain was

working just fine. He knew what you were after. He spotted your game before anyone else and he braced you for a cut of the profits."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm not trying. I'm saying it. Right out in front of witnesses. You were Ira Madden's personal attorney. You had drawn his will. You were the executor. You knew that he had left everything to his daughter Lily, and you knew about Madden's heart attack and that he might kick off at any time."

Colson's jaw ripped. "So?"

"So you went to work on the girl. You zeroed in. She never had a prayer. All that high-pressure, virile charm beamed at the poor, sad little pigeon. And she fell. Oh, how she fell! I saw her in your office, mesmerized and moonstruck. You planned on marrying the girl, and after that it would be a breeze conning her out of the estate. Especially that money in the Bahamas. One million tax-free dollars."

"Why in hell would I need Lily's money? I'm a successful lawyer."

"Try another hole, Colson. That one doesn't fit. You've limited yourself to one client for ten years—Amalgamated Mechanics, Madden's private fief. Now Mad-

den is dead and when the opposition takes over you'll probably get axed. It's too late to start a new practice. So you were desperate. Everyone knows you're a big spender and couldn't stomach a change in style. So you were itching to get your hands on Madden's loot in that numbered account."

Perspiration bathed his face. "How would I know where he kept that money?"

"You knew because Madden told you—an essential step in passing the money on to his daughter. That's the drill, a fixed procedure in transferring secret accounts. The bank has been told the name of the depositor's beneficiary. When he dies, his lawyer must notify them and furnish an official death certificate, which allows them to transfer the account. In this case, to Lily Madden. But only for a short time, because ultimately you'd take control. Not a cent to Amalgamated Mechanics. And knowing all that, Oster wanted in, so he put the bite on you."

White lines framed Colson's mouth. "If he was blackmailing me, why would he go to the IRS?"

"To pressure you. So you would deal with him. That's why he had to be put on ice."

Colson flattened a hand against his chest. "Are you intimating that I killed Floyd Oster?"

"Not intimating. Accusing you outright. You knew Oster. You knew he would bleed you dry. There was no other way out. I called on the man myself. I know that he doesn't open his door for visitors. But he'd open the door for you, especially if he thought you were ready to talk business."

Colson turned away, facing Nola and Prime, arms spread wide in appeal, voice charged with sincerity. "Something's happened to Jordan. He's gone soft between the ears. I'm a respected member of the bar. It's absurd to think I would kill a man for money."

"Money," I said. "The usual motive. In this case, one million bucks. Men have plundered and slaughtered for less. But you had still another motive, Colson. I think you were the moving force behind Oster's attempt to bribe Judge Bolt. You set it up. You've been around the courts a long time and you knew that Judge Bolt was vulnerable. And you were terrified that if Oster ever came to trial he might break and implicate you. That would be the end; complicity, conspiracy, disbarment, disgrace, prison. How does that grab you for motive?"

A dark vein bulged in a blue

diagonal over his left eye. "You haven't got a shred of evidence."

"Maybe not. But you have, Colson. You're holding it now in your sweaty right hand. Oster was killed by a bullet through the head. So the killer fired a gun. The police will perform a nitrate test to determine if any gunpowder particles were blown back into the skin of your palm. And if the test is positive, how will you explain it? Target practice in your office?"

He lifted his hand and stared at it.

"And that isn't all," I said. "I don't think you had the time or the foresight to drop your weapon off the Staten Island ferry. They know how to look. They'll find it and make a ballistics check."

He transferred his gaze to me,

his tongue rimming his mouth.

"You want more, Colson? Here it is. Lt. Nola will put an army into the field, locating witnesses to prove you were in Oster's neighborhood at the critical time. That's a heavily populated area. Somebody must have seen you coming or going."

He found his voice. It was gravelly and hoarse. "I'm leaving. I don't have to stand here and listen to this ranting maniac."

As he headed for the door at an awkward trot, Nola came up fast and blocked his way. "Not so fast, Counselor. We have a little business to transact at headquarters."

Ed Colson blinked, his eyes lost. Then he doubled over and got sick, right there in the Manhattan office of the Internal Revenue Service.

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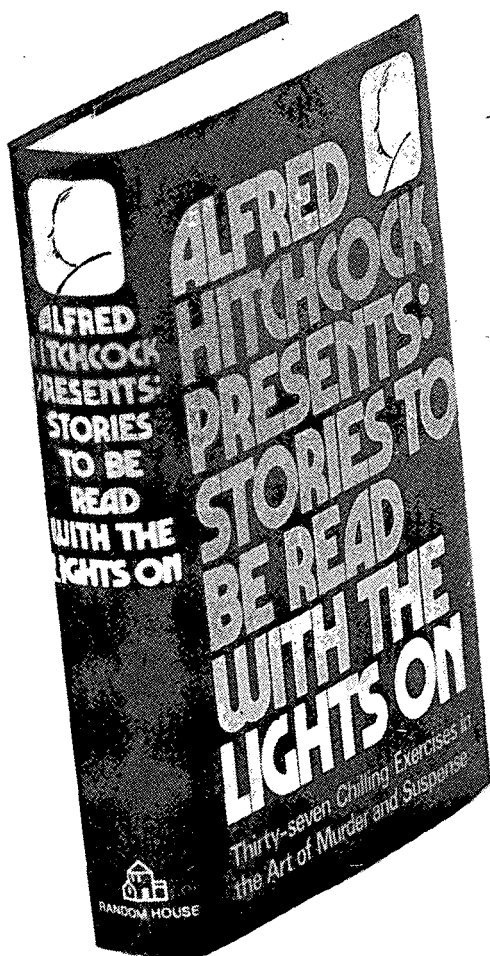
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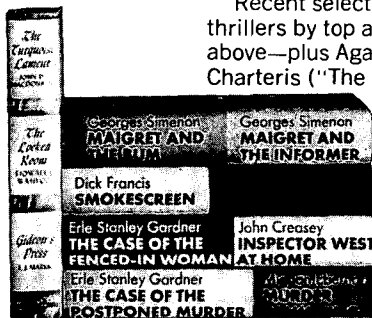
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